



## **Margins of print: Ephemera, print culture and lost histories of the newspaper**

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## Introduction: 'Margins of Print: Ephemera, Print Culture, and Lost Histories of the Newspaper'

H. G. Cocks and Matthew Rubery

The following advertisement appeared during the summer of 2009: 'Sincere, charming, interdisciplinary conference seeks fascinating and stylish participants for extensive discussion of print's many byways. No photos necessary, though abstracts appreciated'. Eligible respondents received invitations to a symposium on the topic of ephemeral forms of print held at the University of Nottingham in January 2010. 'Margins of Print: Ephemera, Print Culture, and Lost Histories of the Newspaper' set out to explore the significance of transitory and elusive texts—such as, but not only, the personal ads—that have eluded traditional categories of print or been dismissed as short-lived, disposable, valueless. The goal of this meeting was to establish the value of a wide range of ephemera found in print culture, from agony aunts to matrimonial ads to humour columns. It also considered particular genres (suicide narratives in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, reports of nineteenth-century 'freaks') and formats (almanacs, tickets), as well as attempting to outline the readership of Victorian popular prints. Above all though, we set out to answer the question: what is the significance of these marginal forms of print?

The organisers of this event themselves met through a scholarly interest in the newspaper's personal advertisements. Our hours spent scrutinizing column after column of personal ads had not been in search of company but rather in search of what these tantalizing glimpses of uninhibited sentiment—at times heart-rending, at times bathetic—revealed about the audiences who wrote, read, and responded to them. We agreed that a conference was necessary to remedy

the lack of critical interest in personal advertisements, which had consequently surrendered the territory to non-scholarly collections with intriguing titles such as *Man with Farm Seeks Woman with Tractor: The Best and Worst Personal Ads of All Time*, *Strange Red Cow: and Other Curious Classified Ads from the Past*, or *Shapely Ankle Preffer'd: A History of the Lonely Hearts Ad 1695-2010*. Instead, we set out to bring together academics interested in sections of the newspaper--correspondence, competitions, jokes, and other marginalia--overlooked by traditional histories of the press.

This is no passing interest on our part. Today there is widespread agreement among historians as to the value of ephemera as cultural documents.<sup>1</sup> Maurice Rickards's accounts of ephemera define this material as both 'a fragment of social history' and 'the minor transient documents of everyday life'.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, ephemeral forms tantalise the historian with their content, offering a glimpse of what might or might not be important. A matrimonial advertisement, for example, offers a useful guide to gender norms via the desired characteristics (or income) of an ideal husband or wife, while one doesn't have to be a Freudian to understand that even 'filler' like humour columns can be a guide to quotidian preoccupations.

However, the ephemeral often gives no more information than what it contains, since its seeming lack of importance means that any information relevant to historical study, such as sales, profits and personnel, was not generally kept. In that respect ephemera is not directly equivalent to other forms of historical evidence. In fact, the appeal of ephemera for many lies precisely in its fleeting

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Andrews, 'The Importance of Ephemera', in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007): 434-63.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Rickards, *This is Ephemera: Collecting Printed Throwaways* (Brattleboro, VT: Gossamer Press, 1977): 9 and *Collecting Printed Ephemera* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1988): 7.

nature – as something not considered of sufficient value to bother preserving for posterity. This is especially true of the disposable newspaper, whose overnight loss of value is best captured in the phrase ‘yesterday’s news’ or its use as fishwrap. The improbable survival of ephemera is therefore noteworthy in itself. These remnants seem to offer access to a kind of unguarded or vernacular version of the past – more so than other artefacts which are either set out with greater premeditation or preserved from the ravages of time as part of institutional collections and official national histories.

Scholarly events dedicated to evaluating the significance of fragments from the past have flourished in recent years. In addition to our own event, conferences on the topic of ephemera have taken place in the past year at Princeton and King’s College London. A major reason for the renewed interest is the increased access to ephemeral materials granted by digital technology. One can see this in Oxford’s John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, which holds more than a million items documenting various aspects of life in Britain dating back to 1508. The online collection has digitised over 65,000 of these items (including theatrical handbills, execution broadsides, and printed advertisements) in the form of high-resolution facsimiles available for searching by researchers *ex situ* since 2008. Material described by Johnson as ‘what is commonly thrown away’ is now accessible beyond the confines of Oxford’s Bodleian Library. Additional digitisation projects—such as the British Library’s Evanion Collection of Victorian Printed Ephemera or the Library of Congress’s Printed Ephemera Collection—will further increase access to fragile, unwieldy material that to this point has eluded scholarly investigation.

The scholar-detective's serendipitous encounter with ephemera will take on new forms among the digital archives, which introduce their own ways of misplacing objects or at least concealing them from view. The challenges posed by digitisation to scholars working with ephemera were a recurring topic of conversation among the participants at our event. Specifically, it is widely acknowledged that digitisation can lead to the tyranny of the keyword search, which, when done badly, means we parachute into the middle of a print jungle and ignore the nature of the ecosystem. Digitisation makes source material available but is not in itself a solution to the dilemma of researching ephemera or of disinterring the everyday. A careful route through the archives (usually non-digitised) still needs to be sought.

While bearing this in mind, scholars have benefitted massively from searchable databases, and despite persistent problems with access to ephemera, academic librarians have acknowledged its value by devising innovative ways for researchers to locate material that is, by definition, difficult to organise.<sup>3</sup> Digital resources are potentially transforming the relationship between researchers and the kinds of archival material used in their research. The follow-up questions arising from these institutional changes raised by our special issue include: what effects will increased access have on the status of ephemera? Can items preserved among digital collections even be said to be ephemeral?

All of these questions complicate an effort to trace the history of ephemera as a single form, as we must recognise that its nature changes over time. Many early newspapers, for instance, initially consisted of small announcements and advertisements that were seen at first by

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the challenges libraries face in managing ephemera collections, see Georgia B. Barnhill, 'Why Not Ephemera? The Emergence of Ephemera in Libraries', *RBM* 9.1 (2008): 127-35.

historians as insubstantial, and were only followed much later by editorial and other content. However, by the mid-nineteenth century a hierarchy of content defined the press, led by political information and descending downwards through commentary and features to advertisements, correspondence, fiction, illustrations, and supplements. As a form, then, the ephemeral can tell us about how such hierarchies operate, how indeed they were established, so that certain items counted as ‘news’ whereas other items did not.

More recently, printed ephemera has been taken to encompass everything printed that is not actually a book. Our forum takes an expansive view of print ephemera and its readers, but also directs attention in particular to aspects of the newspaper (its ‘lost histories’) that have not been sufficiently examined by historians. Rickards’s *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera* (2000) includes an entry for ‘Newspaper’ among its crowded pages that acknowledges the futility of efforts to produce a comprehensive record of this malleable document: ‘Of all ephemera, the newspaper offers perhaps the most prolific, if not always the most reliable, source of record’.<sup>4</sup> The following sub-categories testify to the profusion of journalistic forms and are in place to aid the encyclopedia’s readers in navigating the newspaper’s profusion: first and last issues, mastheads, headlines/front pages, commemoratives, improvised newspapers, mock newspapers, language minority newspapers, ships’ newspapers, and curiosities. In the essays to follow, our contributors single out their own ephemeral categories for critical investigation.

The six essays gathered together for this special issue ask probing questions about the status of newspaper ephemera. Nearly all address the fundamental question: What does it mean to be

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian*, ed. Michael Twyman (London: The British Library, 2000): 212.

ephemeral? In doing so, contributors insistently return to our relationship with ephemera by examining the judgements responsible for establishing hierarchies of value in the first place. Their inquiries examine whether items have been deemed insignificant based on their content, format, or intended audience; by deliberate choice or by accident; and even whether there are degrees of ephemerality—a hierarchy among the valueless. The accounts given here are a reminder of the extent to which judgements as to what is worth preserving have changed over the centuries.

The contributions to this special issue of *Media History* take as their object of inquiry material overlooked or discounted by previous scholarship. These essays propose different justifications for the value of ephemera to scholarly research. Some of the essays argue that ephemera may be more important than has been recognised by previous studies; others argue that the very status of these items as ephemera enables them to reveal aspects of our history not disclosed by the traditional archives. The conflicting, even contradictory, views of the past that have been preserved by ephemera are one justification for a forum in which to discuss its status as historical documentation and the appropriate methods for working with neglected forms of print.

Another focal point among the contributors is the relationship between the ephemeral and the enduring. How does the one impinge on the status of the other? We began our inquiry with the expectation that ephemeral items would in modest ways contest the prevailing view of history. What we didn't foresee was the extent to which the interaction between the two would in some cases confirm the ephemeral to be more lasting than thought, or, vice versa, the enduring to be less so.

These issues are addressed in two related ways by our contributors. Adrian Bingham, Karl-Christian Feuhrer, Pamela Epstein, and Bob Nicholson broadly consider what key ephemeral forms actually contain, and what they can tell us about the societies that produced them, while Laurel Brake and James Mussell examine the ways in which matters of archiving and digitisation raise questions about preservation, selection, and what can actually be seen by the digital viewer. To take the first approach first. Correspondence columns present particular difficulties for historians, as they usually present only one half of the conversation. However, Pamela Epstein's study of these sections of the *New York Herald* in the last half of the nineteenth century shows that correspondence columns were a key method of presenting urban wonders and scandals, a way of incorporating sensationalist narratives into the mainstream press, and a means of negotiating the terrain of the modern city. Bob Nicholson has also scoured the nineteenth-century press, in this case the provincial British newspaper, for its columns of 'American humour'. This represented a staple product of the provincial paper and, he argues, was a key element in the British fascination with the United States and in the importation of a democratic American style in both press and culture.

Adrian Bingham's paper takes us forward into the twentieth century. In particular, he takes as his source the British agony column, and especially its advice on sexual, moral, and marital matters. The golden age of newspaper agony ran, he suggests, from the 1930s to the 1970s, and is a useful gauge of the changing nature of sexual mores in Britain. Marriage is also the subject of Karl-Christian Feuhrer's paper on the Jewish matrimonial advertisements of pre-war Nazi



Germany. Far from being removed from the press at this time, they flourished, and now give us an indication of the mores of a community on the verge of destruction.

Turning to questions of archiving, preservation and selection, Laurel Brake directs our attention to the formats through which the nineteenth-century press has survived into the present. Through comparison of individual issues with bound volumes of *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, among other publications, Brake makes a forceful case for reconsidering the ephemeral status of periodicals in light of their complex publishing histories. Similarly, a chance encounter with supplementary material omitted from many editions of the *Monthly Repository* is for James Mussell an opportunity to reflect on the status of ephemera in material and digital print environments. His essay moves out to consider the role of ephemera more broadly in relation to the materiality of digital artefacts and the cultural practice of memory. All six contributions, through their different approaches and interests, suggest that ephemera is hardly the straightforward category for which it has long been taken.

We faced a choice toward the form in which to publish this material: A flier? A broadside? A 'zine? In the end we resorted to that most traditional of publication formats, the scholarly journal. We're optimistic that this special issue of *Media History* will make a lasting contribution to the study of ephemera and its relationship to the press and other textual forms.