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Private news: Private letters as a source of news in eighteenth-century Copenhagen newspapers

Jørgen Mührmann-Lund

Shocking news

On the morning of Saturday, 1 November 1755, Lisbon was struck by an earthquake that completely destroyed the Portuguese capital. It took over a month before news of this shocking event was published in the Copenhagen newspaper, *Kjøbenhavnske Danske Post-Tidender* (Copenhagen Danish Gazette). On 14 November, the Danish and German issues of this newspaper had printed reports from anonymous correspondents in Amsterdam, Glückstadt and Lübeck about a mysterious movement of water that had hit those ports on 1 November. The cause of this tsunami was not revealed to the Copenhageners until 5 December. On that day, the newspaper contained a short notice that ‘particular letters’ about the earthquake in Lisbon had reached Copenhagen. It was briefly reported that 100,000 of the inhabitants had perished, but that the king had survived. The use of the definite form reveals that ‘the earthquake’ was already the talk of the town when the notice was written. The following issues were full of detailed accounts of the disaster. Some of these were official diplomatic reports, but the majority were ‘particular’ or ‘private’ letters and accounts that supplied the readers with first-hand and often very emotional accounts. Written in the present tense, they created a sense of contemporaneity between the time of the event and the time of reception, which is typical of the news genre even to this day. An example is a letter from an anonymous French merchant to ‘his correspondent’ that was published on 15 December:

I am the only one of my household to have survived, with the cloak I wear on my body, this terrible disaster that has swallowed up Lisbon. (...) From a spot in the fields, to which I had escaped, I have seen the great and mighty city be destroyed and the largest buildings being lifted up by the earthquake and thus be thrown back and forth, as though they had been placed in a sling. This terrible sight was accompanied by the pitiful wails and laments of many thousand people who screamed towards the heavens and pleaded for the mercy of God whose harsh judgement they were experiencing.¹

The fact that the recipient is a correspondent reveals that this account was produced for a professional news agent. Other private accounts of the earthquake published in the newspaper appeared to be genuine private letters addressed to a specific recipient and not the general public. This is the case in an excerpt from another private letter printed in the issue of 12 December. Judging from the content, this author was also a merchant:

I am writing these few lines to you on an open field to inform you of the terrible earthquake that befell on this city on the first of this month in the morning around ten o'clock in the morning. All of the houses and the churches in the city are destroyed, and what the earthquake has spared is being ruined and laid waste because of the fire that is spreading across the rest of the city and has already destroyed the customs house and its Indian House with all of its goods. As soon as the dead, whose numbers are estimated to be many thousands, are buried, it will be clear if anything may be saved. It is assumed that the king will have the salvaged goods distributed equally among all.²

The content of this letter is not as emotional as the previous account, but it contains information of importance to other merchants who were the main target audience of the Copenhagen newspaper. Thus, the newspaper noted on 8 December that it was impossible to publish the rate of exchange as usual, because the earthquake had caused great confusion all over Europe.

It seems that private letters could be addressed to specific persons as well as to the general public. This is demonstrated by the letter from a group of German merchants in Lisbon to a correspondent in Hamburg that was published in *Kopenhagener Deutsche Post-Zeitungen* (Copenhagen German Gazette), which was the German equivalent of the above-mentioned newspaper. The letter was addressed to 'my most noble lord!'; but it also contained a list of German survivors and a postscript requesting that the letter be read out aloud to inform the relatives of the named survivors.³ In this way, a letter could be private and public at the same time. Publishing the letter in a Copenhagen newspaper would serve as reading it out loud while informing the general public as well.

These examples raise the question of what may then be regarded as private about these letters and accounts. One answer could be that they were written by private actors such as merchants and not by persons employed by the state such as diplomats or courtiers. However, it is notable that eighteenth-century news in general consisted of unedited, subjective accounts and in some cases had the form of private letters written to specific recipients rather than the general public. Did this mean that the newspapers sought to convey to the reader some sense of privacy, intimacy or confidentiality in a positive sense? This privacy of correspondence is the topic of the following investigation of the eighteenth-century concept of the private letter. By privacy of correspondence I mean a less formal, more confidential and personal form of communication by letter between two persons and not intended for a wider public. Although private letters ceased to be private when they were published, it is still possible to investigate whether notions of communicative privacy were associated with this type of news.

The investigation begins with a short survey of the use of private letters and accounts in Danish newspapers during the period from 1750 to 1800. Secondly, I will investigate the phenomenon of private news as a remediation, a term used by media scholars designating the tendency to incorporate older forms of media into new ones. In this case, private letters in newspapers can be said to represent the manuscript newsletter that preceded the printed newspapers, but also continued to exist alongside them. Thirdly, I examine letter privacy and secrecy in relation to mail surveillance and postal espionage. Finally, the emergence of the new eighteenth-century ideal of the private letter as an expression of subjectivity or personality will be discussed in the context of publication.

Private letters in eighteenth-century Copenhagen newspapers

In a survey of the use of the word 'private' in Copenhagen newspapers from 1749 to 1800 by Pernille Ulla Knudsen and Helle Vogt, about 10 per cent – 368 out of 3,562 occurrences – concerns private letters (*breve, skrivelser*) and accounts (*beretninger, efterretninger*) that were used as sources for foreign news. The short notices about private letters and accounts are not explicit as to what was 'private' about these, but it is possible to locate small hints from the context in which they appear. All of the examples in this analysis come from the main source of foreign news in Copenhagen in the second half of the eighteenth century: The newspaper published twice a week by the Berling family, from 1749 to 1762 called *Kiøbenhavnske Danske Post-Tidender* (Copenhagen Danish Gazette) and from 1762 to 1808 *De til Forsendelse med Posten allene privilegerede Kiøbenhavnske Tidender* (The Copenhagen Gazette reserved exclusively for Distribution by Post). From 1749 to 1767, the Berlings also published a newspaper in German, called *Kopenhagener Deutsche Post-Zeitungen* (Copenhagen German Gazette), with the same layout as *Kiøbenhavnske Danske Post-Tidender*, but with a different content.

Private letters are primarily mentioned as sources for news about wars and other disastrous events of importance to the international economy, as we saw in the case of the Lisbon earthquake. Private letters and accounts were used as sources for the major international conflicts of the period such as the Seven Years War, the American War of Independence, the Russo-Turkish and Austro-Turkish Wars and the revolutionary wars at the end of the century. Foreign news dominated the Danish newspapers of the time. In 1720, it took up 84 per cent of the content, in 1750 61 per cent and in 1800 76 per cent of the content. It has been estimated that the number of newspaper readers went from 1 per cent in 1720 to 10 per cent of the population in 1800. The great emphasis on foreign news indicates that the readers were mainly court officials and merchants from the upper strata of society, with a special interest in that kind of information.⁴

The newspapers used private letters and accounts in the absence of and as a corrective to more biased official sources during times of conflict. One such example comprises the reports by London correspondents from the American War of Independence. On 7 July 1775, the *Kiøbenhavnske Tidender* printed news about the beginning of the war

under the headline 'Of Letters from London, 20 June'. The correspondent quoted private letters from Americans who were ready to defend their rights in response to the British siege of Boston. He also mentioned that the court had received an American peace offer in a dispatch from the British general Sage, but that this was contradicted by private letters from America, and concluded from the perspective of a Brit that one should expect a protracted war in 'our' colonies.⁵ In another report in the same newspaper, this one from a London correspondent on the fall of Charleston in 1780, an American officer taken as prisoner of war was quoted for saying that the morale on the American side was low. Contradicting this statement, the correspondent referred to private letters stating that the Americans had fought with great resolution during the siege of the city and had only surrendered when provisions ran out.⁶ Later, news of the decisive British defeat at Yorktown in 1781 also came via private letters from London addressed to a correspondent in Hamburg, before official news from London confirmed it.⁷

Quotes from private letters give the reader some sense of getting confidential information from a friend with inside knowledge. A report from the London correspondent published in the *Kjöbenhavnske Tidender* on 5 July 1776 contains an excerpt from a private letter sent from Philadelphia to what appears to be a British merchant: 'Perhaps you hope to see our trade restored to its former condition; but you may be assured that the ministry has driven the dealings with us so far that no one would ever consider a peace agreement. We are now looking for good alliances and have in particular our eyes on Spain.'⁸ During a crisis between Britain and France in October 1787, the newspaper published a private letter from what appeared to be a French minister:

At this very moment, I am returning from Versailles. The decision to go to war has been made; all members of the council, except one principal minister, have voted for it. An order has been sent to all harbours to work most eagerly on the preparation of our ships. People will wonder at our efforts, and the world will see that France is not as bereft of means as people think.⁹

This letter seems to be an example of strategic communication rather than a leak of top-secret information. However, such letters must have met a desire on the part of private citizens to know the secrets of states. During another time of international crisis, in 1785, an Austrian correspondent impatiently lamented in the newspaper that:

The point at which most news-lovers promised to reveal to us the great secrets of cabinets has passed, without the public yet having been informed about the secret political order of Europe and about the subject of the so long and eagerly led negotiations. In a time, where according to public as well as private accounts, there can be no doubt of the amicable settlement of the Dutch cause, the movements of the Imperial Forces have, however, not ceased.¹⁰

The reliability of private sources was in some cases questioned. In a news report about 'letters from London' from 4 February 1777, a correspondent mockingly wrote that people 'amused themselves' with rumours from private letters, because the court

had not yet received news from the Philadelphia campaign. As he explained, 'some' regarded new rumours to be truthful, because previous rumours had turned out to be true. Later that year, a London correspondent complained that, because the court had not made any announcements about the capture of Philadelphia, the newspapers do battle about whether the British troops had won the campaign or not. Their 'weapons' were 'private letters, truthful or invented'.¹¹

The preference for private sources instead of official news, as well as the fear of misinformation, is also present in the reports from the Russian and Austrian wars with the Ottoman Empire. During the outbreak of the Austro-Turkish war in 1788, a Vienna correspondent complained that it was impossible to obtain 'genuine private accounts' from the front in Hungary, because a lot of them were fake news, presumably exaggerating the victories of the Austrians.¹² Another report from this war hinted at postal censorship, as the Vienna correspondent said that he was only allowed to write that the emperor as well as Russia recognized the Ottoman governor, Mahmud Bassa, as the sovereign ruler of Albania.¹³ As shown by Jesper Jacobsen in his chapter about censorship, the Russian government was especially concerned with controlling information about Russian affairs in foreign newspapers. Thus, during the secret negotiations between Catherine the Great and her allies in Kiev in 1787, a correspondent wrote that the police kept a close eye on foreigners. Private residents must be careful what they wrote about the affairs of the state in their letters and even 'persons of rank' were not allowed to send dispatches without permission.¹⁴

These examples from an eighteenth-century newspaper show that 'private letters' were typically newsletters written by private persons such as merchants who were not in the service of states. The news from private sources would normally be regarded as more trustworthy than official statements but could also be rejected as unsubstantiated rumours. We have also seen that private news correspondence posed a threat to the control of information by states during times of international conflict. However, the use of the private letter as a news source could also be seen as a remediation of manuscript newsletter that preceded and existed alongside the printed newspapers.

Remediating the private letter

Tilda Maria Forselius has used the concept of remediation to explain why the genre of private letters was used as a way of addressing the readers of the first Swedish weekly magazines of the eighteenth century. Remediation is a term developed by media scholars David Bolter and Richard Grusin to describe the tendency to incorporate older types of media into new ones. The goal is to create a sense of transparency by removing attention from the mediation and insisting on some contact point between the media and what it represents. Put simply, it seeks to make the content seem as real as possible.¹⁵ Thus, the first printed newspapers could be seen as a remediation of the handwritten newsletters that emerged during the Renaissance and still existed in the eighteenth century as a more exclusive form of news service. Forselius has investigated a collection of forty-eight handwritten newsletters sent to a Swedish noblewoman in 1727 and 1728, but finds no noteworthy differences between these and contemporary

printed newspapers, except for some emphasis on domestic topics that might reflect specific interests. Unlike the magazines, the author is not present in the first person and does not address the receiver personally, except in a postscript included in the last issue of the collection.¹⁶

This find should lead us to question the simplicity of Robert Darnton's theory that handwritten newspapers continued to exist, because they were not subject to censorship, as were the printed newspapers; there might be more to the story.¹⁷ In an investigation of English manuscript newsletters from the eighteenth century, Rachel Scarborough has also noted that the manuscripts contained the same uncontroversial news as did printed newspapers. Both media contained unedited anonymous letters from diplomats and correspondents in order to increase the trustworthiness of the news as first-hand accounts. She therefore argues that the continued existence of the manuscript newsletter cannot be ascribed to the lack of censorship and suggests contemporary concerns about the impersonality of print as an alternative explanation.¹⁸ Recent research on eighteenth-century manuscript culture has also emphasized the continued importance of the manuscript, because the emergence of a print culture meant that handwritten documents came to appear as more closely linked to the private body and the individual personality.¹⁹ This indicates that the private or personal character of the communication actually increased the value of its news contents.

Heiko Droste has offered a convincing explanation why subscribers were willing to pay five to ten times the price of a printed newspaper for a manuscript newspaper. At the beginning of the early modern period, the establishment of paper mills and postal infrastructures had enabled the spread of letters as a medium of communication. To begin with, news was exchanged in letters among members of the elites as signs of mutual friendship, although such letters would also be copied and circulated to larger audiences. The first handwritten newspapers were sold as articles of commerce in the 1500s and were later supplemented with printed newsletters in 1600s. Droste finds a possible explanation for the survival of the manuscript newsletter in a tract from 1700 by the German jurist Johann Peter von Ludewig (1668–1743) on the use and abuse of newspapers. Arguing from the perspective of the prince, Ludewig thought that the value of news decreased, the more it became available to the public. Thus, a personal letter from a diplomat to the prince would contain more valuable news than those that could be read in a printed newspaper. This could explain both why the elite preferred handwritten newsletters well into the eighteenth-century and the use of private letters in the printed newspapers.²⁰

Degrees of publicity

In older studies of Danish media history, it is often assumed, as Darnton does, that handwritten newspapers survived into the eighteenth century, because they were not subject to the same censorship as were the printed newspapers.²¹ The earliest known handwritten newsletter is included in a letter to the Danish-Norwegian King Christian III (1503–1559; r. 1536–1559) from Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), the Lutheran reformer at Wittenberg, in 1550. Like the later printed newspapers, this newsletter

contains very brief and factual reports on war and peace in various European countries. Such newsletters can be seen as a way to secure the favour of a patron, but Christian III is also known to have paid correspondents in the German cities of Lübeck and Strasbourg. One of them was the Weimar court-preacher, Johannes Aurifaber (1519–1575), who only asked for the salary of the messenger for sending news so confidential that Aurifaber asked the king to burn his letters to avoid being compromised.²² This type of news exchange corresponds to the more private and thus more valuable kind of news mentioned by the German jurist Ludewig, which would later take the shape of diplomatic correspondence.

A more publicly available news service began with the selling of printed news sheets about single events of a sensational character. The oldest news sheet in Danish is from 1542 and contains a first-hand account about the destruction caused by a swarm of locusts in the German land of Lausitz.²³ From 1609 and onwards, the first weekly newspapers with several news items began to appear in Germany and the Netherlands. In Denmark, the establishment of a postal service in 1624 furthered the spread of news to a larger public. In 1634, both a bookseller and a book printer in Copenhagen were given the privilege of printing newspapers in Danish and German, but no copies of these have been preserved. A regular production of Danish newspapers did not begin until the 1660s, but printed newspapers from Hamburg continued to dominate the Danish market for printed newspapers until the middle of the eighteenth century.²⁴ The tone of the first Danish newspapers was official. They consisted of short, factual news reports from abroad and official announcements and propaganda on behalf of the absolutist regime. However, a more personal form of address was used in the Danish and German versions of the weekly newspaper, *Extraordinaire Relation*, published by Joachim Wielandt (1690–1730) and subsequently his widow during the period between 1721 and 1748. Until 1741, each issue opened as though it were a private letter, addressing 'My Lord!' and ending with 'I remain N.N.'²⁵

This remediation of the private letter is probably caused by the continued competition from handwritten newsletters. For example, in the letter book of Johan Bartram Ernst (1663–1722), there are some copies of letters with news from Copenhagen, which he wrote in the period from 1699 to 1701. The recipients of his news from Copenhagen were the Danish ambassador in Saxony, a count from Holstein, a Norwegian colonel and a Danish nobleman. Most of Ernst's letters contained private messages, but some consisted of only news items under the headline 'Nouvelles'. Using his connections at the court, Ernst was able to report on sensitive matters, such as a conflict of etiquette between foreign ambassadors at court, the sale of public offices and the conflict with Holstein. This exchange of news was not commercial; rather, it seems to have been a way of networking with possible benefactors. Given the sensibility of his news reports, it is ironic that Ernst would later become censor and author the first ordinance on censorship of the printed newspapers in 1701.²⁶ From 1697 onwards, a correspondent named Fastenaw published a handwritten newspaper with news from Copenhagen called 'gazette à la main'. The Danish ambassador in Moscow described its content as a mixture of news on what was happening in the capital 'in private circles as well as in public life.'²⁷

News from abroad would mostly reach Denmark via the postal offices. In a diary entry from 1677, the later bishop, Jens Bircherod (1658–1708), describes how he as a student went to the postal office in Odense to hear the latest news from the handwritten newspapers sent to the local postmaster.²⁸ Furthermore, the staff at the Danish post office in Hamburg supplemented their income by writing newspapers based on the latest news from abroad. The later director of the postal services, Christian Erlund (1673–1754), made a fortune from handwritten newsletters during his employment as a postal secretary and controller in Hamburg, 1704–1711. In the last year of his employment, he earned 2,218 rixdollars from this sideline business. He had eighty-six subscribers from the elite, including the Crown Prince, diplomats, members of the nobility and several postmasters, who may have sold copies of Erlunds newsletters.²⁹

After his promotion to postal controller in Copenhagen in 1712, and later to director of postal services in 1725, Erlund continued to write newspapers with news from the capital, but now anonymously. He is most likely the author of the handwritten newspaper ‘Nouvelles de Copenhague’, of which some issues from 1721 have been preserved. In its form, this newspaper is public in the sense that it does not feature the personal opening address and the signature at the end, but some postscripts do contain personal messages. Its contents were in some cases more controversial than that was published in the printed newspapers. For example, in 1727, Erlund was reprimanded after the provincial governor of Aalborg had complained that the Copenhagen newspaper had made it publicly known that the governor had applied for a discharge.³⁰

In 1731, the right to publish handwritten newspapers in Copenhagen became a privilege attached to the office of the postal manager and, from 1734, it was subjected to censorship. However, this did not kill off this seemingly more private news service. As we have seen, handwritten newspapers were also the subject of government intervention. Instead, the market for handwritten newspapers appears to have gradually disappeared after 1749, when the Berling newspapers began to publish domestic news which until then had only been available in the handwritten newspapers.³¹

Breaches of privacy

The fact that handwritten newspapers could contain more sensitive information raises the question of whether the postal officers opened private letters to obtain information for their newsletters. If so, this again raises the question of whether newspapers in some cases breached privacy by publishing private letters which had not been intended for publication in the first place. On the other hand, early modern postal services are also known to have opened letters in order to monitor and censor the news flow during times of war. The fact that private letters contradicting the official accounts of the American War of Independence were able to slip through the postal offices in Britain suggests a more liberal postal policy there than in more absolutist regimes such as Austria and Russia. The question is whether this was also the case in the absolutist state of Denmark-Norway.

The extent of postal espionage and censorship during Danish absolutism has previously been investigated by Sune Christian Pedersen. The constitutional principle of privacy of the mails was invented during the French Revolution and was not introduced in Denmark until the Constitution of 1849, which also brought absolutism to an end. However, the international legal literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries operated with an implicit contract of security and confidentiality between the postal services and their customers. Thus, the postal ordinance of 25 December 1694 stated in its ninth section that it was strictly forbidden to remove letters from the mail bags unless the king had specifically ordered this. An instruction for the postmasters from 1705 also states that it was their duty to deliver each letter unopened and unharmed to its proper recipient.³² Shortly after attaining actual regency in 1784, the crown prince and later king Frederick VI (1768–1839, r. 1808–1839) felt compelled to repeat that the post masters ‘should not dare to open or break the letters of anyone’. Only the king, as the absolute ruler, could request the opening of specific letters without a court order. This repetition was, moreover, an expression of the fear that the king and his men could also fall victims to postal espionage. However, Sune Christian Pedersen thinks that the decree of 1784 could also be interpreted as part of the more liberal policy that characterized the early years of the crown prince’s new regime.³³

The monopolization of postal services by the state has in itself been interpreted as a way of enabling postal surveillance.³⁴ The first known example of Danish postal surveillance occurred shortly after the establishment of a royal postal service, which made the carrying of letters a royal monopoly. In March, 1625, King Christian IV (1577–1648, r. 1596–1648) ordered an English messenger from Hamburg to open and read some diplomatic mail addressed to the English ambassador, revealing a Swedish plan of military attack plan.³⁵ Other cases of postal surveillance and censorship discussed in Sune Christian Pedersen’s study also mostly concern postal espionage in times of war. The case of the postal espionage carried out by Christian Erlund during the Great Northern War, 1701–1721, is of particular interest to the question of private news being leaked in handwritten newspapers written by postal staff. In 1701, Erlund served the king’s younger brother as a footman, until he had to flee the country to avoid a death sentence for killing the footman of another prince. Thereafter, he first served in the Danish regiment in the Netherlands, but in 1703, his patrons at court helped him to attain employment at the Danish postal office in Hamburg. He later claimed to have opened many letters there, with information of relevance to the war effort, and to have sent copies of these letters to the Danish king, who in one year should have received as much as 433 copies. He claims to have done so at his own initiative, but according to Pedersen, it is likely that he had been recruited as a spy in return for the pardon he received in 1711. In 1712, Erlund was promoted to a chief position at the main office of the Danish postal services in Copenhagen, where he continued his postal espionage for the King Frederick IV (1671–1730, r. 1699–1730) until the king’s death in 1730.³⁶

As mentioned earlier, Erlund was also a very successful publisher of handwritten newspapers. His involvement in the systematic opening of letters raises the question of whether the contents of his newspapers were in part based on information in such letters. Sune Christian Pedersen claims that it is unlikely that Erlund would run the risk of openly breaking the law in this way, but does at the same time mention the case

of the Hamburg postmaster Johan Heuss (1670–1744) who was later accused of exactly this offense.³⁷ Heuss was employed as postmaster at the Danish post office in Hamburg in 1712, when Erlund left for Copenhagen. Like Erlund, Heuss began to publish a handwritten newspaper, although he was instructed not to correspond with more than ten or twelve persons outside of the postal services, so as to avoid his work there being hindered by ‘private affairs and writings.’ To assist him with the newspaper, he enlisted four or five scribes, a composer and four correspondents in the Netherlands. His main competitors on the Danish market for handwritten newsletters were the Danish postal secretary Gangloff, a private correspondent named Barckhausen and a postal secretary at the Prussian post office named Griesch. In 1718, Heuss was accused of opening and copying the newsletters of Barckhausen and Griesch and stealing their content for his own newsletters. His defence strategy was to claim that he received the same news from his correspondents, much as his competitors did from theirs. Referring to some ‘curious’ letters from Paris in Barckhausen’s newsletter, he even claimed that those letters were read aloud in every beer house in Hamburg. ‘To avoid several suspicions,’ he was strictly forbidden to continue publishing his newspaper, but continued nonetheless to do so, now leasing his business to a front man. In 1723, Heuss was denounced by Gangloff for secretly employing a scribe named Hartvig to publish some confidential reports from the Danish ambassador in Moscow, which Hartvig had obtained from a cousin at the court in Petersburg. This time, the Danish resident in Hamburg came to the defence of Heuss and Hartvig promised not to write about Danish ambassadors again.³⁸ The case of Heuss tells us that a position in the postal services gave ample opportunities to extract information from private letters, but it is difficult to ascertain the extent of this practice.

Masked personalities

According to the royal instruction regarding the censorship of the printed Danish newspapers of 19 March 1701, it was prohibited to publish anything that might threaten the security of the state and the reputation of its officials or that might insult foreign states. The Copenhagen newspapers could only present brief and impartial extracts of the most relevant news from the printed and handwritten newspapers brought in by post. The editors must report only ‘what had really happened’ and leave out the ‘reasonings’ and ‘useless guesses’ of the foreign correspondents.³⁹

In other words, news was to be stripped of private opinions. However, as was the case with the news of the Lisbon earthquake in *Kjøbenhavnnske Danske Post-Tidender*, most foreign news printed in eighteenth-century newspapers consisted of unedited letters from anonymous correspondents or eyewitnesses. Private letters were not only used to report factual events. From the beginning, Berling’s newspaper also printed private letters that contained exactly such political ‘reasonings’ and ‘guesses’ that were forbidden in the censorship instruction of 1701. For example, an issue from 1750 contained a letter from a Corsican nobleman to a friend in Livorno with the Corsican’s thoughts on a possible union with France. That same year, the newspaper also

contained a 'particular' letter sent from Warsaw to 'My lord!' discussing the political situation in Poland.⁴⁰ Other private letters contained moral anecdotes such as a letter from Leiden to another lord about a French cavalier who got lured into a correctional prison by a lady whom he had tried to seduce by making indecent advances.⁴¹ Some of the private letters concerned matters of the utmost privacy, such as a vindictive suicide note written by a London gentleman quoted in an issue from 1750:

My dear wife! This serves you to let you know that you are the cause of this unhappy event. Your conduct towards me has left me out of my mind. We could have lived together in happiness and confidence, if your conduct towards me had matched mine towards you. I hope that the person whose fault it is might reflect upon on this sad and unfortunate incident. The child I leave behind, I leave in the care of God, and I ask him to forgive you for what you have done and hope that he will forgive me, as I have had enough of my life. Your husband, John Bracey.⁴²

In this case, the name of the author was mentioned. This was probably done to boost the realistic look of this anecdote with a moral warning against adultery. In most other cases, the private letters were anonymous.

The widespread use of unedited and anonymous private letters in eighteenth-century newspapers can be seen as a strategy of obtaining truth and trust. As mentioned earlier, news in the form of unedited private, non-commercial correspondence between members of the elite would be considered of a higher value than reports written for the public by a paid correspondent.⁴³ According to William B. Warner, the publishing of unedited letters from abroad was also a way of distributing responsibility for the accuracy of the news. In this way, the responsibility for the truthfulness of a given account shifted from the editor to the newspaper network from which it had been copied.⁴⁴

In the case of the Copenhagen newspapers, most news was copied from the printed and handwritten newspapers of Hamburg. In 1753, Johan Heuss the Younger, who had taken over the newspaper business of his father in Hamburg, was asked by the Danish government to name the author of a certain article. He replied that he did not know the names of his foreign correspondents, and that no one would supply him with news if they could not remain anonymous. He found his suppliers of news through his network of correspondents and diplomats and he communicated with them via middlemen.⁴⁵

The attempt of the Danish government to find the author of a specific article represents a trend that emerges at the end of the eighteenth century to regard texts as the individual expressions of an author. However, in the early modern period and throughout most of the eighteenth century, the norm was to publish anonymously. Censorship laws targeted printers, but neither editors nor authors until the end of the century.⁴⁶ In place of the masked author, authenticity and credibility were created by the style of the text and the way the anonymous author addressed the reader.⁴⁷ An eloquent, formal style would convince the reader that the author was, in fact, a diplomat or a government official addressing another member of the elite, and this invited the reader into the imagined community of the elite. Such letters dealt with matters of

public interests, for instance international politics, but the emotional letters of tragedy and disaster represented a new type of masked personality that had come into fashion in the eighteenth century. In the case of the Lisbon earthquake, the readers would not only be informed of the facts, but also get an insight into the emotional state of mind of the survivors. Even a letter from the Portuguese king to the Spanish king was quoted in the German version of Berling's newspaper to provide insight into the Portuguese king's emotional state of mind: 'I am filled with the most intense pain; the one thing that touches me the most by the sight of my sunken capital, is the destruction of my poor subjects, and I try as best I can to help those, who have survived this disaster.'⁴⁸

The use of letters to express opinions about public matters such as morality was first used in the English weekly magazines *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, published 1709–1712. This genre soon inspired the emergence of similar magazines across the rest of Europe. In Denmark, a few magazines of this kind appeared in the 1720s and 1730s, but the genre did not really gain ground until the 1740s, with magazines such as *Den danske Spectator* (The Danish Spectator) and *Den patriotiske Tilskuer* (The Patriotic Spectator). Following this, the epistolary form as a medium for debate also entered newspapers and books, as in the moral essays published by enlightenment thinkers such as Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754). It has been assumed that the epistolary essay was used, because a public sphere had not yet come into existence.⁴⁹

However, as argued by Heiko Droste, the early modern press should not be seen as a Habermasian public sphere, but rather as an exclusive medium for the learned elite.⁵⁰ According to Tilda Maria Forselius, the authors of private letters in Swedish weekly magazines would mask themselves behind pseudonyms, and the readers would be addressed in second person and even be invited to send in letters to the editors themselves. Forselius interprets the use of the epistolary form as a rhetorical strategy intended to invite the reader into an imagined elite community of shared bourgeois values. Another interesting observation of Forselius is the development of the letters from a classic rhetorical and less personal style in the earliest journals from the 1730s, to letters claimed to be written by a 'real' woman, and with a higher degree of reflection and emotionality, in a women's journal from the 1770s.⁵¹

The familiar letter

The new genre of the private or familiar letter as a medium to express spontaneous, subjective feelings emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century. The familiar letter was invented as the spontaneous antithesis of the rhetorical letter during Roman antiquity and was revived during the Renaissance, but had its breakthrough in the eighteenth century, where the letter became a more commonly used medium due to more efficient postal services. As mentioned, it was also a literary genre used to create an illusion of subjectivity and immediacy.⁵²

The earliest Danish letter manuals of the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century only concerned the rhetorical form of the traditional letter used to network with benefactors. The first Danish manuals on how to write a private or 'natural' letter appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁵³ The first was *Anmærkninger*

over den Konst at skrive et godt Brev (Remarks on the Art of Writing a Good Letter) from 1749 by the Danish author Johan Finkenhagen (1730–1769). In the foreword, Finkenhagen distanced himself from the ‘old-fashioned’ letter style of ‘the polished world’, which according to him contained too much ‘flattery’ and ‘affection’ and too little ‘esprit’. The letter addressing a friend should resemble a natural conversation, but still remain polite and without the digressions of speech. On one hand, you should not be too cautious, writing as if the whole world might read your words. On the other hand, you should not confide too much, because letters might be preserved and used against you, if your friends turned to enemies. In particular, Finkenhagen warned against slandering the honour of a lady or ‘swearing like a sailor’.⁵⁴ In other words, the fixed nature of writing limited the privacy of communication when it came to socially unacceptable emotions.

An ideal for a more private letter was presented in another manual published by a German author, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–1769), in 1751, and translated into Danish in 1762. In his foreword, the Danish translator noted that the private letter should resemble a free and innocent conversation, ‘where we in a sense open our soul to the person we are speaking to’.⁵⁵ Gellert stated in his foreword that the exemplary letters of his manual were, indeed, private letters written to ‘real’ persons and were never intended for print. This made them livelier, freer and thus more agreeable. In this way, Gellert made a distinction between the authentic private letter and the fake one that appeared in the printed media.⁵⁶ According to Gellert, the tasteful emotional letter should be based on the less formal, yet still polished form of conversation practised at the salons of the time, but all the same be free of boring everyday language.⁵⁷ Gellert wrote his manual particularly for women whom he believed to be better at writing natural letters because they were more emotional than men, unless they had been raised among people of no taste or had studied too much. The less emotional (man) would write in a blunt and tasteless style that Finkenhagen likewise considered too private for letters.⁵⁸ Thus, the private letter of the eighteenth-century should only express an authentic self only insofar as this accorded with the norms of the culture of emotionality which was formed at the end of the century.

Conclusions

This investigation of the private nature of public early modern letters (or lack thereof) began with the question of what was private about the private letters mentioned or quoted as sources for news in the Copenhagen newspapers from the second half of the eighteenth century. The short answer is that ‘private’ signified that the author was a private merchant or correspondent, not employed by the state.

In the analysis of the use of private letters in the Copenhagen newspapers, I have first shown that they were considered to be more reliable than official communication during times of war, although they could also be suspected of spreading rumours and be subjected to state censorship and manipulation. However, the emotional first-hand accounts from the Lisbon earthquake may also indicate that the private letters were used to convey a sense of authenticity and immediacy to the readers.

Second, I have investigated the qualities of private correspondence as a news source in the printed newspapers and interpreted them as remediations of handwritten newspapers. The manuscript newsletter owed its continued popularity among the elite to its seemingly private character, although this more expensive source of news service was also mass-produced and in fact differed little in content to the more widely available printed newspapers. However, contemporaries such as the author Ludewig thought that the value of news decreased the more public it became, which is why he considered the news in a handwritten newsletter to be more reliable would be more reliable than those in a printed newspaper. This could explain why the first printed newspapers mimicked the form of private letters in terms of subjective and seemingly confidential first-hand accounts from abroad. The reader thus had some sense of being invited into an exclusive community of distinguished readers. However, the case against the director of postal services Erlund, for publishing sensitive information about a civil servant, shows that handwritten newspapers in Denmark were subject to the same censorship as the printed ones.

Thirdly, I have examined the extent to which it was possible to maintain letter privacy during Danish absolutism, when postal officers could open and copy private letters for their manuscript newsletters. Although there was no constitutional right that protected letter privacy during absolutism, the postal ordinances clearly stated that postal officers were not allowed to open letters. Only the king had the right to do so without a court order. Most known cases of systematic postal surveillance stem from times of war, with postal officers such as Erlund seemingly acting on behalf of the king. The proceedings against Heuss show that it was not acceptable for postal officers to use contents from sealed letters in published newsletters, but this happened nevertheless. This case did, however, not concern the privacy of subjects, but rather the theft of state or commercial secrets.

The fourth and last part of the investigation concerned the presence of private or personal opinions and emotions expressed in the private letters published in the newspapers. The censorship ordinance of 1701 ordered the publishers to publish only facts and to edit out the personal reasonings made by the correspondents. As a reaction, however, it became common to print unedited letters so as to distribute responsibility for the content to the news network of correspondents, who were able to hide behind anonymity. Anonymity meant that authenticity and credibility had to be created by means of a particular style. The epistolary form was used, not only to mimic the private newsletter, but also as a platform from which to express private opinions under the mask of anonymity in a pretended dialogue with the reader.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the ideal of the 'familiar' or 'natural' private letter emerged as the antithesis to both the traditional rhetorical letters as well as the fake personal letters on print. However, the proponents of this new letter style warned against being too candid and open with friends, due to the fixed nature of writing, and instead recommended a relaxed, yet polite form of communication resembling the less formal type of conversation practised at the salons of that time. The amount of privacy in the private letters published in newspapers was therefore limited, given that those letters were indeed authentic private letters and that the authors had the risk of publication in mind. However, I would argue that a positive notion of privacy of

correspondence is present in the use of the private letter as a source of information in the Copenhagen newspapers of the late eighteenth century. Although a private letter might just be a letter from a private person of no rank, this type of news source was also associated with positive notions of communicative privacy, such as credibility, authenticity, confidentiality and immediacy.

Notes

- 1 'Jeg er den eneste af mit Huus, som med Kiolen jeg bær paa Kroppen er undgaaet den skrekkelige Ulykke, som har opslugt Lissabon. Min Lykke, mine Effecter, og alt hvad jeg i denne Verden eyede er begravet under Ruinerne af en Stad, som var bleven mit andet Fæderneland. Jeg er bleven 72 Aar gammel, paa det jeg skulde være et Vidne om den forfærdelige Straf, som Guds Vrede kan lade komme over Menneskene. Fra det Sted paa Marken, hvor jeg var flygtet hen, har jeg seet den store og prægtige Stad at blive ødelagt, og de største Bygninger ved Jordskielvet at blive opløftede og saaledes at kastes frem og tilbage, som de havde været i en Slynge. Dette saa forskrækkelige Syn blev ledsaget med mange tusinde Menneskers ynkelige Jamren og Klagen, som skrege til Himmelen og anraabte Guds Barmhiertighed, hvis strenge Dom de erfore. Hvor jeg seer hen, saa finder jeg hundrede Personer som jeg, der intet har tilbage foruden Erindringen af deres forrige Lykke. Vi ere ulykkelige og vi gjøre andre ulykkelige med os. Thi vore Engagementer ere tillige med Staden, i hvilke de vare formerede, og hvoraf de havde deres Bestandighed, gangne til Grunde. Kort, Lissabon er ikke mere til, og skulde den engang blive opbyggt igien, hvem torde vove at lade sig ned her', *Kiøbenhavnske Danske Post-Tidender* (KDP) 15 December 1755, letter from a French merchant to his correspondent in Paris, 5 November.
- 2 'Jeg skriver dem disse faa Linier til paa aaben Mark, for at give Dem Efterretning om det forskrækkelige Jordskielv, som paakom denne Stad, den 1 hujus om Formiddagen henimod Kl. 10. Alle Huse og Kirker i Staden ere ødelagde, og hvad Jordskielvet har ladet staae, bliver formedelst Ilden som har udbredet sig over den tilbagestaaende Deel af Byen, og som allerede har fortæret Tolhuset og det Indianske Huus med alt dets Varer, forstyrret og lagt øde. Saasnart de Døde, hvis Antal man skatterer paa mange Tusinde, ere begravne, faaer man at see, om endnu noget staaer til at redde. Man formoder, at Kongen lader alt det Gods som bliver berget uddele i lige Deelee blant alle. De Vare, som ere opkøbte for de seglfærdig liggende Floder, kan nu ikke blive betalte, saasom Kiøberne ere omkomne i Ilden. Da alle Møller ere gangne til grunde, saa have vi og her under aaben Himmel Mangel paa Brød, og nyde intet, uden hvad Folk fra Landet af Medlidenhed vil bringe til os', KDP 12 December 1755, excerpt of a letter from Lisbon, 4 November.
- 3 *Kopenhagener Deutsche Post-Zeitungen* (CDP) 15 December 1755.
- 4 Bruhn Jensen 1996, 74–6.
- 5 De til Forsendelse med Posten allene privilegerede Kiøbenhavnske Tidender (PKT) 7 July 1775.
- 6 PKT 30 June 1780.
- 7 PKT 7 and 17 December 1781.
- 8 'De haabe maaskee, at see vor Handel igien sat i forrige Stand; men de være forsikret, at Ministerium har drevet Sagerne med os saa vidt, at man neppe nogen Tiid skal kunde tænke paa et Forlig. Vi see os nu om efter gode Alliancer, og have i sær vort Øye paa Spanien', PKT 19 July 1776.

- 9 'I dette Øieblik kommer jeg fra Versailles. Krigen er besluttet; alle Medlemmer af Conseilet, den eneste Principalminister undtagen, have givet sin Stemme til samme. Til alle Havne er sendt Ordre, at arbeide med største Iver paa vore Skibes Udrustning. Man maae forundres over vor Virksomhed, og Verden vil faae at see, at Frankrige ikke er saa blottet for hielpekilder, som man troer', PKT 26 October 1787.
- 10 'Det Tidspunkt, paa hvilken de fleste Nyheds-Elskere lovede os de store Cabinets-Hemmeligheder opdagede, synes nu at være temmelig nær, om ikke allerede forløben, uden at Publikum endnu har faaet nogen Oplysning om Europas hemmelige politiske Forfatning, og om Gienstanden for de saa længe og ivrig førte Underhandlinger. Paa en Tiid, da der, saavel efter alle offentlige som private Efterretninger, ikke er mere at tvile om den Hollandske Sags mindelige Afgiørelse, ophøre dog ikke de Keiserlige Troppers Bevægelser', PKT 2 May 1785.
- 11 PKT 3 March and 28 November 1777.
- 12 PKT 14 April 1788.
- 13 PKT 17 April 1788.
- 14 PKT 14 May 1787.
- 15 Forselius 2013, 16–19; Bolter and Gruisin 1999, 21–49.
- 16 Forselius 2013, 113–30.
- 17 Darnton 2000.
- 18 Scarborough 2018.
- 19 Berndtsson, Fischer, Mattson and Öhrberg 2017, 8–11.
- 20 Droste 2011 and 2019.
- 21 Bruhn Jensen 1996, 70–1.
- 22 Kirchhoff Larsen 1942, 14–17; Stolpe 1878, 104–6.
- 23 Kirchhoff Larsen 1942, 18; Stolpe 1878, 41.
- 24 Søllinge and Thomsen 1989, 27. In 1718 the postal service delivered 472 Hamburg newspapers in the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein and 355 in the kingdom of Denmark.
- 25 Søllinge and Thomsen 1989, 91–3.
- 26 Kirchoff Larsen 1942, 114–18; Stolpe, vol. 3, 1879, 295–302; Stolpe, vol. 4, 1882, 27–9.
- 27 Stolpe, vol. 4, 1882, 29–30.
- 28 Ibid., 17.
- 29 Ibid., 40–5.
- 30 Ibid., 45–52.
- 31 Ibid., 52–9.
- 32 Pedersen 2008, 33–6.
- 33 Ibid., 253–61.
- 34 Ibid., 2008, 25.
- 35 Madsen 1991, 392.
- 36 Pedersen 2008, 99–223.
- 37 Ibid., 108–9.
- 38 Stolpe 1882, vol. 4, 32–6.
- 39 Instruction of 19/3 1701, § 3–9, in Stolpe 1879, vol. 2, 352–3. The norm that news should contain objective facts and not be mixed with subjective comments is still part of the Danish code of press ethics (www.pressenaevnet.dk/god-presseskik).
- 40 KDP, 27 February and 10 July 1750.
- 41 KDP, 15 January 1751.
- 42 'Min kiære Kone! Nærværende tiener eder til Efterretning, at I ere Aarsag i denne ulykkelige Tildragelse. Eders Forhold imod mig har gjort mig afsindig. Vi kunde

have levet lykkelig og fortrolig med hverandre, dersom eders Opførsel var kommen overens med min. Jeg haaber, at det Menneske, som har med Skyld deri, skal gjøre sig nogen Omtanke over denne sørgelige og ulykkelige Tilfælde. Det Barn, som jeg efterlader mig, befaler jeg i Guds Omsorg, og beder ham, at han vil forlade eder, hvad I have gjort, og som jeg er mæt og kied af mit Liv, saa haaber jeg, at han skal lade mig vederfares Naade. Eders Mand, John Bracey, KDP, 13 November 1750.

- 43 Pettegree 2014, 308–25.
- 44 Warner 2018, 34.
- 45 Stolpe, vol. 4, 1882, 38–9.
- 46 Horstbøll 2010.
- 47 Forselius 2015, 84–6.
- 48 KDeP, 12/12 1755, a letter from Paris of 25 November with a quote from this letter.
- 49 Jensen et al. 1983, 225–39.
- 50 Droste 2019, 35–7.
- 51 Forselius 2015, 41–50, 131–44, 187–210.
- 52 Andersen 1999; Anderson and Ehrenpreis 1966.
- 53 Fjord Jensen et al. 1983, 59–69.
- 54 Finkenhagen 1749, 1–10, 19–23.
- 55 Gellert 1762, 3–10. Foreword by the translator Jacob Baden.
- 56 Ibid., 11–12.
- 57 Ibid., 30–1.
- 58 Ibid., 96–9.