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The 1721 Boston Smallpox Epidemic and the Origins of the Opinion Editorial

The first publication of James Franklins' *New England Courant* is usually considered a pivotal moment in the history of the colonial American press. First released in the midst of the famous 1721 Boston smallpox epidemic, the *Courant* is considered a brash and opinionated departure from the norm, the first unlicensed and unregulated newspaper in the colonies. In contrast, newspapers prior to 1721 are seen as bland and unimaginative, largely focused on events overseas, topics that were less touchy than those close to home.

There is some truth to this version. The *Courant* was a departure in style from the dense earlier colonial papers, and it certainly was opinionated. Fashioned after London's *Spectator*, it was satirical, irreverent, and took every opportunity to chafe against authority. But the *Courant's* new style, however confrontational, did not fundamentally change how the press operated. In fact, it was Boston's other two newspapers, the *Boston Gazette* and the *Boston News-Letter*, both owned and operated by the local postmaster, that introduced genuine controversy into the public discourse by offering up competing viewpoints within their own newspaper. They were the first publications in America to start featuring genuine "op-eds", publishing readers' opposing perspectives in the same paper. By doing this, they helped shape what American newspapers would become.

This evolution was made possible by the 1721 smallpox epidemic, a public health crisis that became a catalyst for change in the colonial press. By clearly outlining the connection

between these two moments in history, readers can understand the different ways the three Boston newspapers approached the extremely heated debates over inoculation, a new and unproven method for smallpox prevention. The story pushes back against an assumption some historians have made, that the *New-England Courant* was a radical and new example of free speech that stoked fiery public debates. James Franklin's *Courant* was stylistically novel, but it only represented one individual's opinion. The *News-Letter* and the *Gazette*, on the other hand, remained neutral while publishing op-eds by readers that often contradicted each other.

The second model is the one we have come to hope for in our newspapers; sources we can trust to allow competing ideas to have a say. Democratic societies believe there is value in a crowd of equal and competing voices, and the idealistic hope is that, by arming people with both the facts and the different views on those facts, "truth will out". Because of this, the invention of the colonial opinion editorial was a more important evolution in the history of modern free speech than the one-sided bulletin, and the story of that invention is worth telling.

On April 22, 1721, smallpox came to Boston on the British naval vessel *Seahorse*. Two seamen on board were sick and others were infected, but the ship had passed by the quarantine station where it should have stopped, and instead docked at Boston wharf.¹ By May, at least one sick passenger had come onshore. The "Distemper", as it was called, spread with alarming speed. An article in the *Boston News-Letter* briefly mentions a May 20th search of all the houses reportedly touched by the disease, and only one case was discovered. By May 27th, there were

¹ Kass, Amalie. *Boston's Historic Smallpox Epidemic*. Massachusetts Historical Society: *Massachusetts Historical Review*, 2012. Pg. 5 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5224/masshistrevi.14.1.0001>

eight cases, “and no more, according to the best information”.² Several weeks later, and smallpox was in every neighborhood in the town. Quarantine and self-isolation, ordered by Boston’s governor Samuel Shute, proved ineffective.

In the late spring and early summer of 1721, there were only two papers in Boston that published any news about the outbreak; the *Boston Gazette*, first published in 1719, and the *News-Letter*, from 1704. They each took a very similar approach to reporting. Dense and unhumorous, they came printed with a bold header and a large subheader that proudly announced “Published by Authority”. They were a combination of merchant’s handbook and foreign news source, with a section for advertisements. As their subheaders suggested, they were papers that operated by royal authority, and their licenses depended on remaining as neutral as possible when it came to current events. This was usually accomplished by simply transcribing speeches by the king and parliament, and publishing travelogues, port statistics, and ads.

The smallpox outbreak changed this. Initially during the crisis, these papers served a vital, and uncontroversial, role. They provided a dispassionate source of information, depending on town doctors and experts. Regardless of the status of the debate over inoculation, the *News-Letter* and the *Gazette* were sources of what appeared as pure fact, with no spin. Anything with opinion was a direct quote. In the July 10th edition of the *News-Letter*, the paper cites the leading town physicians, who identify that the disease “is Propagated by three causes, the Air, Diseased Persons, and goods transported from Infected Places”.³ A Dr. Mead proposes a number of sensible measures, including avoiding crowded public spaces, and quarantining goods shipped

² *The Boston News-Letter*, May 22-29, 1721. Readex Database: *America’s Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.oca.ucsc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&t=pubname%3A1036CD221971FE08%21Boston%2BNews-Letter/year%3A1721%211721/mody%3A0529%21May%2B29&docref=image/v2%3A1036CD221971FE08%40EANX-10566482848DF1BC%402349791-105664828A9CB57C%400>

³ *News-Letter*, June 9-12, 1721. Pg 1.

from France and England. Quarantines for people are advised in subsequent issues. But soon, both papers began to publish readers' letters. This quickly created a forum for debate, and these debates turned on the highly controversial topic of inoculation, an early form of vaccination that, to many, appeared unproven and foreign.

First, some history is necessary on the inoculation procedure and the debates' main protagonists. Cotton Mather, probably the most famous among the public figures in this controversy, was a puritan minister and an avid scientist. Though these two occupations would have seemed contradictory to some, Mather believed that scientific study was a form of Christian piety, fulfilling God's desire for humans to understand the natural world. If the natural world was shaped by divine wisdom, he reasoned, then it was worth studying. He was constantly researching and writing on scientific and medical topics, publishing over 400 books and pamphlets in his lifetime.⁴

By the time of the Boston smallpox outbreak, Mather had been sold on the practice of inoculation for several years. His conviction began with a series of anecdotes. He had been curious about the procedure ever since Onesimus, a West African enslaved man, told Mather about his own inoculation in 1707. In 1716, Mather read a report in the esteemed British interdisciplinary magazine *Philosophical Transactions* about a similar Turkish procedure that caused a mild case of smallpox, then left the recipient immune. The article was based on the findings of Italian doctor Emanuel Timonius. Timonius describes the process he witnesses,

⁴ Tindol, Robert. *Getting the Pox off all their Houses: Cotton Mather and the Rhetoric of Puritan Science*. University of North Carolina Press: Journal of Early American Literature, 2011. Pg. 2
https://www-jstor-org.oqa.ucsc.edu/stable/25800129?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=Cotton&searchText=Mather&searchText=Inoculation&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DCotton%2BMather%2BInoculation&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_SYC-5152%2Fcontrol&refreqid=search%3Ab5bf9932589084f3b8c57199da2b4fd5&seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents

where a small incision is made in an otherwise healthy patient, and a small amount of pus drawn from a person with a mild case of smallpox was mixed into the incision. He remarks that the process, which had been introduced in Constantinople just eight years prior by traveling Georgians and Circasians, was hugely successful and rendered the population immune. “At first, People were cautious and afraid. But the happy success on thousands of Persons for eight years now past, has putt it out of all Suspicion...none that have used it ever died of the Small-Pox”.⁵

Around the same time, accounts about the procedure began to gain traction in the upper classes of England because of the work of two royal women, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Princess Caroline. Lady Montagu was an educated, intelligent noblewoman, who in 1716 traveled to Turkey with her husband, appointed by Britain as ambassador to the Ottoman empire. Interested in smallpox prevention methods, she came across the process of inoculation, or engrafting, as the Turks called it. In her popular travelogue “Letters from the Embassy”, she writes that the disease had been rendered “entirely harmless” in Turkey. She had her son inoculated, and claims he was completely asymptomatic after the procedure. “I am patriot enough to take the pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England” she wrote, “and I should not fail to write to some of our doctors very particularly about it”.⁶

These letters caught the attention of both Princess Caroline and Hans Sloane, England’s head royal physician. Princess Caroline sought out Sloane’s opinion on whether her children

⁵ Tindol, *Getting the Pox off their Houses*. Pg. 3

⁶ Weiss, Robin and Esparza, Jose. *The Prevention and Eradication of Smallpox*. Royal Society: *Philosophical Transactions*, April 2015. Pg. 3
https://www-jstor-org.oqa.ucsc.edu/stable/24498773?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=1721&searchText=smallpox&searchText=epidemic&searchText=hans&searchText=sloane&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3D1721%2Bsmallpox%2Bepidemic%2Bhans%2Bsloane&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search%2Fcontrol&refreqid=search%3A3ca98ae86cbb8dae70d9b5f9d6df0ba3&seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents

should be inoculated. She decided to take the risk after Sloane informed her about two successful inoculation trials, the first conducted on “volunteers” on death row, who were told they would be released if they survived, and the second on orphan children at a parish. The princess’s children were inoculated, and subsequently recovered.⁷

This went a long way in making the procedure acceptable among the English nobility and medical establishment, which was primarily upper-class. But there was a disconnect between the scientific community in England and colonial Boston. When Cotton Mather sent a letter to the town’s doctors on June 6th, 1721, trying to convince them of the practice, none of the doctors responded. His second letter from June 23rd also received no reply.⁸ Eventually, Mather found a receptive audience in Zabdiel Boylston, a physician with a reputation for performing dangerous surgical procedures.⁹ Boylston, convinced by the studies Mather told him about, decided to inoculate his own child, his slave, and his slave’s son.

On July 15th, Boylston sent in a letter to the *Boston Gazette*, and it appeared in the July 17th issue. It was an editorial, written by a local, on a local and controversial topic, and for any licensed newspapers at the time, this kind of thing was unheard of. Though small bits of news from the colonies would usually appear in the paper, the focus was almost always on foreign events. Uncontroversial news was the norm, and when news was interesting it was presented in a factual, bland and un-opinionated manner. Publishing someone’s opinion on as divisive a topic as inoculation was an unprecedented decision.

Boylston’s letter, which was buried in the advertisements section of the two-page newspaper, began, “I have patiently born with abundance of Clamour and Ralary, for beginning

⁷ Weiss and Esparza, *The Prevention and Eradication of Small-Pox*. Pg. 2.

⁸ Kass, *Boston’s Historic Smallpox Epidemic*. Pg. 12.

⁹ Kass, Pg. 13

a new practice here, (for the good of the Publick), which comes well Recommended, from Gentlemen of Figure & Learning”.¹⁰ Boylston was likely referring to Mather’s recommendations, and cites Timonius’s studies. Clearly, though the town physicians had met Mather’s suggestions with silence, Boylston had been criticized for the practice.

His letter describes the outcome of his experiment. “...my Negro man, who was taken ill a day or two before the other two, in which time the Symptoms abating, caused me hope for the other two”. As to his son and his slave’s son, “the Fever, with the rage of the People, Sufficiently affrighted me, but I no sooner used means, but the fever abated, and the Small Pox came out, and they never took one grain or drop of Medicine, and are perfectly well”.¹¹ He describes how, in his patients’ case, the pock marks that generally disfigured people with the disease instead dried up and fell away. He concludes his letter saying that, in the coming weeks, he hopes to provide readers with more evidence to the effectiveness of the procedure.

A week later, a letter signed by “W. Philanthropos” appeared in the *Boston News-Letter*. This is understood to be the pseudonym for William Douglass. A Scottish physician who came to Boston in 1716, Douglass was “egotistical, arrogant, contentious, and ‘a strong hater” according to historian Amalie Kass.¹² With his traditional medical background and a disdain for those who practiced medicine without academic training, he looked down on the medical apprenticeship system and the practice of medicine as a hobby. And as the summer of 1721 wore on, Douglass became the leader of the opposition to inoculation.

¹⁰ *Boston Gazette*, July 10-17, 1721. Readex Database: *America’s Historical Newspapers*. Pg. 2
<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.oca.ucsc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&t=pubname%3A1036CD2E61FB47A0%21Boston%2BGazette/year%3A1721%211721/mody%3A0717%21July%2B17&docref=image/v2%3A1036CD2E61FB47A0%40EANX-1046E0246C0E95F5%402349840-1046E0247170A0B9%400>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Kass, *Boston’s Historic Smallpox Epidemic*, Pg. 19.

The letter, appearing in the July 24th issues of both the *News-Letter* and the *Gazette*, begins by suggesting that readers might be interested in “the history of this affair from its origins, how it came to be divulged here, (and) the success of the first Essay to put it in practice, with the Character of the Operator”. Douglass pulls no punches about the “Character of the Operator”, clearly referring to Zabdiel Boylston, who he calls “a certain *cutter* for the stone”.¹³ The logic he uses is partly an appeal to scientific authority, partly prejudice. He briefly mentions the study in *Philosophical Transactions* by Timonius and a separate study by Jacobus Pilarinus, describing the Turkish method as “practiced there by *Old Greek Women* on Turks and others about 50 years ago.” He then turns to Boylston’s study. “B---n’s first practice” he writes, “was on his own Child and two Negro’s, *the child barely escaping with his life*”. “It happened unluckily that the undertaker being *illiterate* was not capable of duly understanding the writings of those foreign gentlemen” he continues. By “illiterate”, Douglass was referring to Boylston’s inability to read Latin. This might have been convincing to readers; people often regarded Latin as a language for scientists and experts, and reading it was a sort of passage to entry into “higher levels” of knowledge. But this is not exactly a convincing argument against the practice of inoculation itself, seeing as Timonius was effusive about the potential benefits of inoculation. Being able to read the studies firsthand, instead of being told about them via Cotton Mather, would only have bolstered Boylston’s convictions.

Douglass makes a couple strong points. Boylston’s procedure was extremely risky, and went against the consensus of Boston’s medical establishment. His main backer, Cotton Mather, was not a physician himself (although he was respected as one in town). But for each of these,

¹³ *News-Letter*, July 17-24, 1721. Pg. 1

Douglass makes just as many disingenuous claims. Near the beginning, he remarks, “this method has been among the Learned Universally known in England about 20 years, but being deemed *wicked* and *fellonius*, was never practiced there”. In fact, the president of the royal society of physicians, Hans Sloane, had hesitantly approved inoculating Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s children in the late winter of 1721. There was some concern in England that the practice was not proven, but the prisoner and orphans studies had been enough evidence to convince Sloane to recommend the procedure.

Inoculation did go against prevailing medical practice. Most doctors at the time found reason to believe in the ancient Greek humoral theory, which stated that good health required a balance between the four “humours”; blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. An excess of any of these was treated by bleeding, purging or induced vomiting, while a deficiency was treated with special drinks and mixtures.¹⁴ The idea that adding a foreign disease into the body, one that didn’t correspond with any humoral deficiency, went against what medical schools taught. Further, it just seemed outright counterintuitive. How could giving someone the disease save them from that same disease? Many physicians believed that smallpox was an impurity in the blood, and bleeding could solve the problem. However, if there were any studies that appeared to convince doctors that this method worked, they are scarce. In an age before clinical trials, drug regulations, and even proper medical credentialing, spotty empirical evidence of humoral theory at work was what doctors went by to bolster their beliefs.

The flow of this information from “experts” to the public was, as it is now, a critical role the media plays. Probably both consciously and unconsciously, papers disseminated medical

¹⁴ Kass, *Boston’s Historic Smallpox Epidemic*, Pg. 4

information that backed up what the experts said. When the King of France was ill, “with Shivering and the Fever”, “after bleeding he was better”.¹⁵ There was no reason for papers to question the causal link between bleeding and cure.

Because humoral theory was the accepted understanding of the body, newspapers published articles that supported it. But at the same time, newspapers knew they were not medical experts. They could not adequately judge the efficacy of a medical procedure themselves. Though the medical practice was not nearly as evidence-based and intensively credentialed as it is now, experts were still experts, treated by others and treating themselves as a class of people who claim to know things most do not. This is why, if doctors disagreed on a practice, it would have been highly logical for a newspaper to print both sides of that argument. Not pretending to know which practice made more sense, they were at least able to publish these opposing opinions so that the public could make sense of the options available to them and make informed decisions.

This is not to say that the published “experts” that appeared in the *News-Letter* and the *Gazette* were always professional. As Douglass’s account shows, some wrote angry and biased attacks. In the spirit of open dialogue, it seems, the newspapers also began publishing columns by random citizens. On the 31st, a week after Douglass’s July 24th publication, the *News-Letter* published another attack on inoculation, this time by a John Forland. He described himself as a well-traveled sailor who spent time between Greek islands. Fearful of contracting small-pox, he

¹⁵ *The American Weekly Mercury*, September 28th-October 5th. Readex Database: *America’s Historical Newspapers*. Pg. 2.
<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.oca.ucsc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&t=pubname%3A10380B67EBBF3BE8%21American%2BWeekly%2BMercury/year%3A1721%211721/mody%3A1005%21October%2B05&docref=image/v2%3A10380B67EBBF3BE8%40EANX-105E3E8FAD019981%402349920-105E3E8FB51A8ED6%400>

asked a local doctor if there was any way to protect himself. The doctor mentioned a “project among the Greeks...where they put something into the flesh that corrupted the blood”. Forland writes that the doctor strongly urged him not to undergo the procedure, warning, “if you should do it, you would never be a sound man as long as you live: And further said that some that had Practiced the project had lost the use of their limbs, and that others swelled up and died sometime after, and that others had the Small-Pox afterward”.¹⁶

There is no way to find out how true this story is. But it is possible that some people died after being inoculated. During the outbreak, Zabdiel Boylston went about inoculating people, and published his findings in his pamphlet *An Historical Account of the Small-Pox Inoculation in New-England* nine years after the crisis. By 1722, Boylston had inoculated 287 people, and recorded that 6 of his patients had died. It is possible, but not too likely, and compared with outright infection, inoculation was significantly better. Boylston’s study revealed a 14.2% mortality rate for those infected and not inoculated, given from the 850 deaths reported out of the 6000 known cases. In his pamphlet, Boylston refers to this study as a “Testimony of divine providence in favour both of the lawfulness and great Advantage of this Method”.¹⁷ He used it to make an appeal to the Queen to bring inoculation into the common western medical toolkit.

Of course, there was no way to be sure of the efficacy of inoculation at the time. All the information available on inoculation was empirical. This was contrasted against the theory of the humours that doctors were taught, a theory that accounted for the inner workings of the human body. Though he wasn’t a medical expert, Forland expressed a totally justified suspicion toward

¹⁶ *News-Letter*, July 25-31. Pg. 2

¹⁷ Boylston, Zabdiel. *An Historical Account of the Small-Pox Inoculated in New-England*. U.S National Library of Medicine. Pg. 12.

<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/bookviewer?PID=nlm:nlmuid-2544007R-bk#page/12/mode/2up>

the foreign procedure. The *News-Letter* provided an outlet for Forland, an average citizen, to speak freely and publish his worry that inoculation would be very bad for Boston.

That same day, July 31st, the *Boston Gazette* published a letter by Cotton Mather, his grandfather Increase Mather, and several others. Though public opinion was leaning against inoculation, the *Gazette* was willing to publish. The letter opens by commenting, “It was a grief to us Subscribers among others of your Friends in the Town, to see Dr. Boylston treated so unhandsomely in the Letter....last week published in your paper.”¹⁸ The comment, referring to the fiery July 24th letter by W. Philanthropos (William Douglass) reveals an interesting point; this is the first evidence that contradictory opinions were presented in the same paper. The *Gazette* was willing to publish a letter by both leading medical experts in the cause for and against inoculation; Mather and Douglass. An important moment in the inoculation controversy, it is also an important moment in the history of the press; for the first time, Mather is directly in dialogue with Douglass in the same paper, in a debate competing for the public’s opinion.

This isn’t to say that the letter was particularly diplomatic. It comes off mostly as an indignant jab at Douglass for attacking Boylston. “We are highly obliged to any learned and judicious person who kindly informs us of the hazard and warns against the practice...yet what need is there of injurious Reflections?” they ask. “Would the Town hear that Dr. Cutler or Dr. Davis should be so treated? No more can it endure to Boyslton thus spit at.” The letter continues by making an appeal to the divine. Both Mathers were important religious figures in town. To

¹⁸ Boston Gazette, July 25-31. Pg. 2.

<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.oca.ucsc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&t=pubname%3A1036CD2E61FB47A0%21Boston%2BGazette/year%3A1721%211721/mody%3A0731%21July%2B31&docref=image%2Fv2%3A1036CD2E61FB47A0%40EANX-1046E02BB7F7DCBD%402349854-1046E02BDF95D2FE%402&origin=image%2Fv2%3A1036CD2E61FB47A0%40EANX-1046E02BB7F7DCBD%402349854-1046E02BC2EC4A73%400>

have God on your side in this situation could both affirm the legitimacy of inoculation and discredit Douglass. So they ask; how could two puritan ministers support a procedure that seemed to counteract God's will? "Who knows not the profanity and impiety of trusting in Men or Means more than in GOD? Be it the best learn'd Men, or the most proper Means?". They had a ready answer, which makes sense, considering that Mather had been loudly advocating for the procedure since the beginning of the outbreak. "...Men of Piety and Learning, after much Serious tho't, have come into an Opinion of the Safety of the faulted method of Inoculating the Small pox; and being perswaded it may be a means of preserving a Multitude of lives, they accept it with all thankfulness and joy as the gracious Discovery of a Kind Provicence to Mankind".

This letter reads like a plea to Boston's citizens to both accept inoculation and treat Zabdiel Boylston better. But if you were not persuaded by the Mathers' appeals to God, then you probably would not have accepted both requests. In Douglass's July 24th letter, he points out that Boylston had been inoculating patients "in the most Publick Trading Place of the Town". He makes a good point. Boylston had been inoculating patients in the town square near the port, a busy area in Boston, and there is evidence that Boylston didn't always tell his patients to self-quarantine after being inoculated. Since there was no evidence as to whether inoculated people could also pass the disease on while experiencing the disease themselves, this was a negligent, unsanitary act. Boylston, known as a "risk-taker" among his peers in the medical profession, was not taking the necessary precautions.

These and more accusations were leveled at Boylston on August 7th, when the *New-England Courant* was published for the first time. Publisher James Franklin had owned a printing shop for several years, and had been employed publishing pamphlets and papers,

including the *Boston Gazette* for a short period. He was not able to obtain a license for his own newspaper, but the intention of the paper was to push back against the town's leading figures anyways, an act that would not have been permitted if his paper was licenced.

Unlike the *Gazette* and the *News-Letter*, which were full of dense ship's manifests and advertisements, the *Courant* was simple, humorous narrative right from the start. Franklin's agenda from the beginning was to air some of his negative views about the clergy, and he manages to combine that with an attack on inoculation advocates like Mather. He writes that he hopes to identify "a certain set of Men, of whom I hope to give a very good account, Who like faithful Shepherds take care of their Flocks, By teaching and practicing what's Orthodox, Pray hard against Sickness, yet preach up the Pox!"¹⁹

The majority of the *Courant's* first issue is not particularly original in content. Most of the first and second pages are taken up by an op-ed written by William Douglass, a lengthened version of the essay that appeared several weeks earlier in the *Gazette* and the *News-Letter*. Douglass, a friend of Franklin's, now felt comfortable enough to sign his name at the top, instead of going by the pseudonym Philanthropos. He began, "The bold undertaker of the Practice of the Greek old Women, notwithstanding the Terror and Confusion from his Son's Inoculation-Fever, proceeds to inoculate Persons from Seventy Years of Age and downwards." Douglass's recurring appeal to prejudice against the old Greek women is odd, seeing that humoral theory was based on Greek ideas from two thousand years prior. He continues, citing a meeting of "select men"

¹⁹ *The New-England Courant*, August 7, 1721. Readex Database: *America's Historical Newspapers*. Pg. 1.

<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.oca.ucsc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&t=pubname%3A108B1C65FB933498%21New-England%2BCourant/year%3A1721%211721/mody%3A0807%21August%2B07&docref=image%2Fv2%3A108B1C65FB933498%40EANX-108B7C7CDE01BB70%402349861-108B7C7CF225B138%400&origin=image%2Fv2%3A108B1C65FB933498%40EANX-108B7C7CDE01BB70%402349861-108B7C7CF225B138%400>

called to discuss the method and its use. “They unanimously agreed that it was rash and dubious; being entirely new, not in the least vouched or recommended...from Britian, tho’ it came to us via London from the Turks, and by a strong *viva voce* Evidence, was proved to be of fatal & dangerous Consequence”. The description of the selectmen’s meeting is true; when the idea was first put to a vote in June, no doctors in town thought inoculation was a good idea.

Douglass also argues that Timonius’s essay, which appeared in *Philosophical Transactions* and went a long way to convince Mather and Boylston that inoculation was harmless, was “published in the *Philosophick Transactions* by way of Amusement”. This does not seem to be true, and neither does the idea that inoculation was “proved to be of fatal & dangerous consequence”. Timonius’s findings were consistent with the findings of others who studied the procedure as it was practiced around the Mediterranean. In one essay, published in *Transactions*, the ambassador from Tripoli to England, Cassem Aga, described the common procedure. “The practice is so innocent and so sure that out of an hundred persons inoculated not two die, whereas on the contrary out of an hundred persons that are infected in the natural way there die commonly about thirty. It is withal so ancient in the kingdoms of Tripoli, Tunis, and Algier, that nobody remembers its first rise”.²⁰ However, this study was published several years after the outbreak.

The resistance of the Boston medical establishment to the procedure is odd, given that by this time inoculation had gained some acceptance in England by the most senior physicians in the country. Why Douglass would dismiss an essay published in *Philosophical Transactions*, an esteemed scientific journal, as “amusement” is also odd. Why not critically argue the study’s

²⁰ Weiss and Esparza, *The Prevention and Eradication of Small-Pox*. Pg. 6

merits and flaws, instead of completely dismissing it, especially if the goal is to try to find a lifesaving medicine in the midst of a pandemic? This kind of attitude, however, does fit with the complaints many people had about doctors in general at the time. Citizens felt that some doctors were fakes and pretenders. This came partly from the incomplete credentialing system that prevailed in early America. Colonial governments tried to establish a licensing system, but town legislation generally did not require doctors to meet certain levels of education. William Smiths' 1757 history of New York complained, "Too many (physicians) have recommended themselves to a full Practice and profitable Subsistence. This is the less to be wondered at, as the Profession is under no Kind of Regulation. Loud as the Call is...we have no Law to protect the Lives of the King's Subjects, from the Malpractice of Pretenders."²¹ This quote describes "hobbyist" physicians, uneducated amateur doctor that sold cures, but it also covers the unregulated medical practice in general.

William Douglas studied in Holland, and was proud of it. He was highly critical of the apprenticeship systems that were more common in Boston, and called the "practitioner of any sort" who had only practiced under that system "an impudent delusion and fraud".²² That elitism was beneficial when directed toward town apothecaries who peddled fake medicines, a fairly common practice. But it also rendered him closed-minded to new solutions. Meanwhile, the crisis continued. The *Courant* in its August 7th issue noted "Above fifty Persons have died every

²¹ Whitfield, Bell. *Medical Practice in Colonial America*. Bulletin of the History of Medicine: *Johns Hopkins University Press*, October 1957. Pg. 3
https://www-jstor-org.oqa.ucsc.edu/stable/44449174?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=medical&searchText=science&searchText=in&searchText=colonial&searchText=america&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dmedical%2Bscience%2Bin%2Bcolonial%2Bamerica%26amp%3Bacc%3Don%26amp%3Bwc%3Don%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff%26amp%3Bgroup%3Dnone&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search%2Fcontrol&refreqid=search%3A781cb67ac356869408aec1e5103e7dc1&seq=7#metadata_info_tab_contents

²² Whitfield, *Medical Practice in Colonial America*. Pg. 2

Day for three Weeks past in the Town and Hospitals. Most of them fall into a dreadful Phrenzy, so that we are forced to tie them”.

In subsequent issues, the *Courant* essentially became a mouthpiece for William Douglass, taking an increasingly angry stance against inoculation. In the August 21st issue, he makes a wild assertion; the smallpox outbreak is not any more deadly than previous years. Unless it was standard for “fifty persons” to die every day in a town of 11,000 people, this statement comes off as absurd. This is an inflated figure--in the worst several weeks, about a dozen people died per day--but Douglass’s assertion is still disingenuous. “We find that from the Arrival of the Small Pox here about the middle of April last...the Burials in Town have not exceeded those of other Years, for the same space of time” he continues. “Few Epidemics or Popular Fevers of any Sort, have been *more favourable*”.²³ Again, this serves to paint a picture of irrational and dangerous inoculators. “They begin by insinuating, that the Town may think this a desperate Remedy; the Small Pox being a very desperate Disease, requires no less.” He remarks that this line of reasoning only serves to “occasion that worst of Symptoms in the Small Pox, Fear & Dejection of Spirits” and insists that “False Rumours...obstruct the Towns being Supplied with Provisions from the Country, and interrupt all Trade, Commerce and Communication with our Neighbouring Colonies...We reckon it our Duty to expose this as *impudent* and *notoriously false*.” This came shortly after Governor Shute imposed a 40-day quarantine for all passengers on foreign ships. A loud and opinionated “expert” denying the deadliness of a virus in favor of re-opening the economy might have some contemporary resonance.

²³ *New-England Courant*, August 21. Pg. 1.

Douglass's statements provoked a response in the *News-Letter*, probably attributable to Cotton Mather. In the August 28th edition, Mather rails against the "notorious, scandalous paper called the *courant*, full freighted with nonsense, unmanerliness, railery, profaneness, immorality, arrogance, calumnies, lies, contradictions..."²⁴ Clearly worked up, his letter doesn't specifically argue for the merits of inoculation; instead it appeals to manners and piety, although he does briefly defend Boylston and his continued practice. What is more interesting is the *News-Letters'* position, or lack thereof. Without advocating for or against the practice, the paper had by then established itself as a neutral party, simply committed to open dialogue by publishing all sides.

The debates continued, and the smallpox crisis grew worse. On September 3rd, the *Gazette* ran an essay by W. Anti-Inoculator (Douglass, again). He rather harshly accuses Mather of harboring "malice that must come from the Devil Incarnate"²⁵ Mather returned with a "faithful account" of the inoculation procedure in the *Gazette*, "partly, to put a stop to that unaccountable way of lying, which fills the Town & Country on this occasion, and partly for the Inoculation & Satisfaction of our friends in other places."²⁶ The *Courant* retorted with an article a week later, and continued publishing angry essays directed at Mather and Boylston almost every week until the epidemic was over. The crisis reached its peak on November 14th, 1721, when someone threw a bomb into Mather's house with a note reading "Cotton Mather, You Dog, Dam you; I'l inoculate you with this, with a pox to you."²⁷ The bomb did not explode, but it was a shocking sign of the intensity the debates had reached. Some people in town firmly believed Mather and Boylston were actively spreading the disease, killing people in the process.

²⁴ *Boston News-Letter*, August 22-28, 1721. Pg. 3

²⁵ *Boston Gazette*, August 27-September 3, 1721. Pg. 1

²⁶ *Boston Gazette*, October 23-20, 1721. Pg. 1

²⁷ Kass, Pg. 28

By the end of September, 2,757 people were infected, and 203 people had died. In October, there were an additional 411 deaths. In November there were 249 deaths, and that month Boylston inoculated 104 people; while many resisted inoculation, it seems that by then he was in higher demand. By the end of February, 1722, no new deaths were reported.

In 1731, Benjamin Franklin wrote “when Men differ in opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the Publick... Being thus continually employed in serving all parties, printers naturally acquire a vast Unconcernedness as to the right or wrong Opinions contain’d in what they print; regarding it only as a matter of their daily labor”.²⁸ This quote came during his time as printer of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a newspaper he owned and edited. But a decade earlier, teenage Ben Franklin would have experienced the press in a very different light. As an apprentice at his brother’s renegade newspaper *The New England Courant*, he would have seen a version of journalism that was aggressively one-sided.

One could argue that a medical crisis with high mortality and widespread fear needs a voice with strong opinions and a willingness to act decisively. James Franklin’s position, we can say with the clarity of hindsight, was outright wrong--but wrong with a conviction based on established medical theories that Boston doctors agreed with. At the same time, Cotton Mather and Zabdiel Boylston went against the medical establishment, correctly convinced that inoculation would save lives, while almost all other physicians disagreed.

After a while Douglass changed course, essentially denying that the disease was dangerous at all. If that was the only opinion available to the public, people may have ignored

²⁸ Starr, Paul. *The Creation of the Media*. New York: Basic Books, 2004. Pg. 61.

quarantines and contracted the disease at even higher rates. It was conflicting opinions that held him accountable. A free press allows for that, and the *Boston Gazette* and the *Boston News-Letter* were the first in the colonies to provide that service.

The *Gazette* and the *News-Letter* were more true to the younger Franklin's ideal form of journalism. Their place in history is often as bland bulletins, reprinting outdated news from overseas and sticking to the English political line. But during the smallpox crisis, they took on a new role, "continually employed in serving all parties". We don't know the decision-making process behind those newspapers, but their actions were what mattered. They printed both sides of the debate, and by appearing disinterested, merely publishing the varying opinions of others, they allowed the reader to draw conclusions themselves. This is an important contribution for a critically-thinking public, and the origins of that contribution can be found in the *Gazette* and the *News-Letter*.