

William Bradford and the Shift of Printers' Role Consciousness in the Middle Colonies

Songchu Liu

School of History and Culture, Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610000, China

Email: solonlsc@yahoo.com

Keywords: William Bradford; the Middle Colonies; Printing

Abstract: As the Middle Colonies gradually became the printing center in Colonial North America in later seventeenth century and first half of the eighteenth century, it also witnessed a revolution of printing industry in early America. Printers in this region experienced the shift of self-identity and role consciousness from “employed artisan” to “free merchant”, based on the context of unique political and religious circumstance. This shift was represented by the practice that the printers supported the notion of press freedom, and organize the trans-colonial, multi-business and inter-connective printing networks. William Bradford was the first printer during this transformation before his printing practice was adopted and expanded by Benjamin Franklin.

1. The Dynamics of Early Printing in the Middle Colonies

The Middle Colonies was the center in which American printing industry transformed during the eighteenth century, as the printing practice and notion of printers in the Middle Colonies represented the epitome of progress in American printing. A booming printing culture had been stimulated by the unique religious circumstances in Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey, which were under control of the Quakers, who were enthusiastic about using printed words to disseminate their ideology, and began to do preaching works in North America since 1660 through the intensive activities of preachers dispatched from the British Isles. Meanwhile, the government in the Middle Colonies had a widely-opened slack attitude towards printing that the printers in most of other colonies didn't have. A massive of immigrants from Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and other religion-turbulent areas in Europe were either attracted or forced to travel across the Atlantic and inhabited in the Middle Colonies, thus became an impetus of the transformation in printing.

The city scale grew rapidly while the immigrants from Europe surged into the urban areas. Philadelphia and New York, as a result, came to be two largest cities in North America in the later half of the eighteenth century. Due to the fact that most of the immigrants carried knowledge or techniques of the Enlightenment Era, the rate of literacy improved dramatically in the communities, and triggered colonists' demand for the new knowledge and news message from their motherlands in the other side of the ocean. This change led to the emergence of a booming reading market for books, newspapers and magazines which served as the basic productions of printing industry in the Middle Colonies.

While the Middle Colonies became the printing and book center in America, there emerged a remarkable shift of printers' role consciousness towards their printing practice and notion, eventually influenced the whole dynamics of printing industry in America. Specifically, the first printers in this area were employed and controlled in a way by the Quakers and colonial government, making themselves employed artisan who only relied on fixed payment from another party. With the gradual promotion of printing technology and literacy, printing became a lucrative business, and the printers started to view themselves as free merchant with self-identity and entrepreneurial spirit, embodied in two layers: first, free merchant believed the freedom of press, and endeavored to control their own fate by accepting printing orders freely without the suppression, investigation or censorship from the governments. Second, they were able to, under the condition that the authorities diminished the regulation for printing with freer contracts, enlarge their

commerce by opening to the wider public, but not constrained by the successive orders from local governments. In this way they could establish an inter-coordinated printing network across colonies, covering multiples of printing spheres and large-scaled printing practice. Benjamin Franklin was considered as an unarguable model in terms of this transition. However, William Bradford, the first printer in the Middle Colonies, and the father of Franklin's competitor in Philadelphia, should be paid more attention, since he started this transition in the burgeoning stage.

The Middle Colonies was established relatively late but embraced printing technology faster than many other colonies, and the printing was not over-hindered by the political or religious factions. The printing in some colonies of North America were censored or even banned by the government at least in the early period, due to the restriction on the Puritan publication which was brought by the Licensing of the Press Act passed in 1662 in the parliament. Virginia government, for instance, held a traditional hatred towards printing dated back to Governor William Berkeley's stance in 1671: "But I thank God, there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both!" [1] Printing was strictly forbidden in Virginia until 1730, only except for a short time when a printer William Nuthead was commissioned to print the sessions laws for the assembly in 1692. Nevertheless, Nuthead's printing press was soon prohibited by Governor Thomas Culpepper in excuse of lacking license and Nuthead had to leave Virginia [2]. There were printing presses working in Massachusetts since 1638, but the government had a more rigid regulation of censorship. The Governors of Dominion of New England forbade the establishment of new printing press in towns besides Boston and Cambridge, where the presses were confined to a small amount and also controlled directly by the colonial government. This regulation forced dissentient printers away from New England. The printing market had been dominated by the Greens in Massachusetts, and the leader of the family served as "the government printer", until the Great Fire of Boston in 1711. Therefore, the printed texts produced in Massachusetts, even New England, were mostly devotional tracts and legislative documents, and this vacancy of diversity lasted well to the eve of American Revolution. The Middle Colonies, on the other hand, had an earlier and quicker start of printing industry comparing to Virginia and Maryland in the South, and less limitation on printing comparing to Massachusetts in the North, which made it the center of printing in North America during the eighteenth century.

The political and religious authorities accepted the printing as a controlling measure for public opinion before 1720. The environment that printers were in a subtle relationship with the authorities, keeping balance and for mutual interest, originated to some extent from the laws and ideologies of the authorities. The Quakers started to control New Jersey in 1664 and Pennsylvania in 1681, thus had their opportunity to make use of printing press for preaching like they did back in Britain: To avoid the restriction of the Licensing Act during the Civil War, they established an efficient underground system of book production and distribution. Therefore, the Quakers intended to encourage the establishment of new printing presses after the control of New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

2. William Bradford's Adventure as a Printer

The first printer of Pennsylvania, William Bradford was arranged by the London Quakers to come to America. He carried with him a letter from George Fox and some printing equipment, and opened the shop in Philadelphia in 1685. His mission in the New World, which was expressed by George Fox in the letter, was to print or import the Quaker publications. Fox also advised the congregation in Pennsylvania to offer orders to him and buy his printed books. In this way the Quakers could preach the gospel efficiently and massively in America, while Bradford could live and profit from printing [3]. It can be concluded that the relationship with printers expected by the Quakers was based on mutually beneficial cooperation to some degree.

Though Bradford was a printer employed by the Friends in Pennsylvania, and Fox had demanded the Philadelphia branch to supervise his output [4], he participated in the printing business mainly

as a role of commercialist but not a Quaker missionary. The first book printed by him was not even a Christian text but an almanac, *Kanlendarium Pennsilvaniense* written by Samuel Atkins. This project was Bradford's commercial adventure as he wrote a note in that book: "I have brought that great Art and Mystery of Printing into this part of America, believing it may be of great service to you in several respects, hoping to find encouragement, not only in this Almanack, but what else I shall enter upon for the use and service of the Inhabitants of these Parts." [5] With this manifest Bradford started a new form of business of job printing, which is printing all sorts of commercial or civil ephemera. It could enable Bradford to run his printing press in a more commercial way rather than solely serving the need of the Friends, while avoiding the restriction of the Licensing Act as well, and it worked as a basis of press freedom of printers in the Middle Colonies.

Bradford had tried some businesses of job printing and almanac printing, but his role of an adventurer should not be overrated since his primary profit came from his contract with the Quakers and colonial government, not to mention he was satisfied to use the title "government printer" for advertising, which confines him to the scope of an employed artisan. Indeed, Bradford only printed two Epistles in 1689, but he also undertook the transatlantic book importation from London for the Friends, and Philadelphia Quaker paid him commission according to their contract. The extreme scarcity of printers in the late-17th century Colonial America made the printing contract with the officials still a lucrative route to thrive. Working for the officials, however, had its own defect especially in Virginia and Chesapeake where press freedom was restricted, or rather, legitimate "press freedom" was almost non-existent: printed texts need to be carefully investigated, and when internal conflicts occurred inside of the governmental group, different factions held different beliefs, printers would be easily involved into those disputes. This is particularly true of government printer.

Contrarily, a plenty of printers began to support or pursue the press freedom in the relatively free Middle Colonies though the print censorship was still powerful, by defending for press freedom with their skills or occupations. Bradford was the first one in this transition. The phrase "press freedom" under the historical context of colonial period in America implies that printers should not work under the pressure of censorship by political or religious institutions, instead they should be eligible to print which textual contents they wanted to print or which clients' orders they wanted to accept, and print the authors' views or comments, including their owns, in liberty without being charged the crime of libel. The actual meaning of "press freedom" was transferred to the freedom of publishing in nineteenth century, but it should be viewed as the freedom of printing during the colonial period, because publishing was an exceptional expensive practice. The publishing business did not truly exist in colonial America besides a few trials.

3. The Initial Exploration of the Concept of Press Freedom

Bradford had begun to explore the initial idea of press freedom from his own experience of being censored and regulated by the government during his printing career. He deeply suffered from censorship in Philadelphia. For instance, his first printed book *Kanlendarium Pennsilvaniense* was listed in the catalogue of censorship of the Friends, and he was consequently warned against printing texts apart from which allowed by the parliament, even the printed translation of Bible was banned. To punish Bradford for his deviance, the parliament charged a guarantee fee and put him in the prison for a short period of time [6]. Bradford became more cautious on printed texts afterwards, but still insisted on that printing should be a route of speech freedom. An example was when he got involved in the conflict inside of the government of Pennsylvania in 1689. William Penn was not welcomed in the government and needed financial support urgently by that time, so he appointed an expert of finance John Blackwell as the new deputy. The former deputy, who was also a Quaker, and his supporters were unpleasant with this appointment, thus, they commissioned Bradford to print anonymously 160 copies of revised charter of liberties granted by Penn to attack Blackwell. The next day Blackwell tried to force Bradford to reveal the author's name, threatening with severe punishment, but still got Bradford's refusal. On the contrary, he defended his liberty on this job with unyielding words in the Abstract. When replying to the threat from Blackwell, he expressed his point of view that not appeared before: printing press should be open to all parties and

work in the free market. Though not accepting this kind of theory, Blackwell didn't punish Bradford with anything but £500 of guarantee fee [7].

Bradford enjoyed his relative freedom of printing not for long until being involved into the internal conflict of the Quakers in 1692. George Keith, who was a close associate of William Penn and George Fox came to Philadelphia in 1689 as the prospective master of a Quaker school. He proposed to establish a bunch of new rules for management of the church in the Yearly Meeting in Philadelphia in 1690, including a written confession of faith and the election of elders, as well as more emphasis on the Bible and the historical Jesus, which were pretty controversial to most of Quakers' principles. The meeting rejected Keith's proposal as a result. Nevertheless, Keith continued to propagandize his concept in America and consolidated a group of followers including Bradford. A pamphlet written by Keith, *The Christian Faith of the ... Quakers in Rhode-Island ... Vindicated*, was printed in 1692 by Bradford with the support of Rhode Island Meeting, but only to meet the denounce in the Monthly Meeting in Philadelphia. Bradford was once again stuck in the middle of two parties, as both of them believed they had the authority to allow printing [8]. The Rhode Island Friends and Keith sent a protest to the Meeting afterwards, arguing that printing should not be objected even though the views expressed in the books were unpopular, not there was nothing wrong with the matter of the book actually [9].

Nevertheless, Bradford was put into prison again because of his preference towards Keith, though ended up with a win in the final judgement due to the lack of evidence. Realizing the situation was turning worse against himself in Philadelphia, Bradford accepted the invitation of New York Governor Benjamin Fletcher and went to New York in 1693. In New York the censorship on printing was much looser than that in Philadelphia, for his contract was mainly printing proclamations, laws and journals of the assembly. Most importantly – he wouldn't be impacted by the conflicts inside neither the political parties nor the religious factions among his printing of non-governmental contents. His son Andrew Bradford, who was left to inherit his printing press in Philadelphia and forced to be regulated by the government, was also influenced by the father's notion on press freedom. The Governor of Pennsylvania William Keith ordered in 1722 that Andrew “must not for the future presume to publish anything relating to or concerning affairs of this Government, or the government of any of the other of His Majesty's Colonies, without the permission of the Governor or Secretary of this province.” [10] Andrew had to be cautious about his printing, but still tried to make complaints to the censorship of the government. For instance, Andrew had ever criticized Massachusetts government for prohibiting the New England Currant run by James Franklin in Boston, calling the authorities “bigots, hypocrites, and tyrants” [11].

4. Conclusion

We can see a controversy in Bradford: On one hand, official printing contract was still the most lucrative enterprise due to the scarcity of printers in colonial America. As Bradford run business as a “government printer”, he still held the limitation on the printer's role-recognition and practice (He became the “government printer” in New Jersey in 1703 besides his contract with New York government); On the other hand, he was also not content with the current circumstance of being supervised, and endeavored to expand the scale of his printing empire to a wider region as a free merchant, and made attempt to improve the status of freedom of printing. When he was running printing press in Philadelphia, he had sent agents to New York, New Jersey and Delaware and kept in touch with them until retirement. His printed texts included commissioned theological books, governmental documents, almanacs, textbooks, legal books and medical books. Besides printing, he had undertaken the business of book binding, publishing and selling of stationery and blank sheet as well [12]. He actually tried to build a printing network like Benjamin Franklin did in the eighteenth century: Firstly, he had issued his own newspaper *New-York Gazette* for almost 20 years; Secondly, he had formed a mutual beneficial relationship of business with his son Andrew and another printer Samuel Keimer in Philadelphia, as well as his agents in the Middle Colonies and New England, for exchanging their stock of books; Thirdly, he participated in the transatlantic book trade with England through the cooperation with his sister-in-law Tace Sowle since 1691; Lastly, he did try to

enter the sphere of publishing, though with the support of the Christian group. For instance, he published an edition of Book of Common Prayer in 1706 but encountered disastrous failure with this adventure, and he got a subsidy as a result from the Trinity Church of New York [13]. Those practices not only made Bradford's enterprise more diversified and larger in scale, but helped the progress of press freedom in the Middle Colonies – Government needed to have a second thought in terms of its interference with the issuing of Bradford's printed texts.

Although Bradford's concept of press freedom was just a preliminary exploration of it, as he didn't have an insight on this idea, nor did he have a scheme of solution, nor a future plan, he did represent the characteristic interim from employed artisan to free merchant. This process during which printers rather than government began to try dominating the printing activities would grow matured after the era of Benjamin Franklin, but in the time of William Bradford, there appeared the first-stage shift of printers' role consciousness and practice.

References

- [1] William Waller Henning. *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619 (Volume II)* [M]. New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823. 517.
- [2] David D. Hall. *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century* [A]. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, *The History in America, Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* [C]. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 62.
- [3] Douglas C. McMurtrie. *A History of Printing in the United States: Middle and South Atlantic States* [M]. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1936. 2.
- [4] Douglas C. McMurtrie. *A History of Printing in the United States: Middle and South Atlantic States* [M]. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1936. 133.
- [5] John Hruschka. *How Books Came to America: The Rise of the American Book Trade* [M]. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. 32-34.
- [6] Louis Edward Ingelhart. *Press and Speech Freedom in America, 1619-1995* [M]. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997. 10.
- [7] James N. Green. *The Book Trade in the Middle Colonies, 1680-1720* [A]. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, *The History in America, Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* [C]. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 202-204.
- [8] Charles Hildeburn. *A Century of Printing: the Issues of the Press in Pennsylvania, 1685-1784, vol.1*. Philadelphia: Matlack & Harvey, 1885, pp.22-23.
- [9] James N. Green. "The Book Trade in the Middle Colonies, 1680-1720," *A History of the Book in America, Volume 1*. p.208.
- [10] Louis Edward Ingelhart. *Press and Speech Freedom in America, 1619-1995* [M]. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997. 15.
- [11] Louis Edward Ingelhart. *Press and Speech Freedom in America, 1619-1995* [M]. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997. 16.
- [12] James N. Green. *The Book Trade in the Middle Colonies, 1680-1720* [A]. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, *The History in America, Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* [C]. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 205-206.
- [13] James N. Green. *The Book Trade in the Middle Colonies, 1680-1720* [A]. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, *The History in America, Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* [C]. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 266.