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Citation for published version:

Fox, A 1997, 'Rumour, news and popular political opinion in Elizabethan and early Stuart England', *Historical Journal*, vol. 40, pp. 597-620. <http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0018246X97007346>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Historical Journal

Publisher Rights Statement:

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The Historical Journal / Volume 40 / Issue 03 / September 1997, pp 597 - 620
DOI: null, Published online: 08 September 2000

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0018246X97007346

How to cite this article:

ADAM FOX (1997). RUMOUR, NEWS AND POPULAR POLITICAL OPINION IN ELIZABETHAN AND EARLY STUART ENGLAND. The Historical Journal, 40, pp 597-620

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RUMOUR, NEWS AND POPULAR POLITICAL OPINION IN ELIZABETHAN AND EARLY STUART ENGLAND*

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ABSTRACT. *This essay explores the circulation of rumour and news among those at the lower levels of society in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England. It does so through an analysis of the court records in which people were indicted for spreading false reports or speaking seditious words and which are now preserved in assize files or amid the state papers. These sources reveal the networks of communication by which information was disseminated nationwide and shed light upon the relationship between oral, manuscript and printed media. They show how wild stories could be whipped up in the act of transmission and were fuelled by the political insecurities of this period. At the same time a more sophisticated awareness of current affairs is evident in some illicit conversations which suggest that even humble people were participating in the arguments which anticipated the Civil War.*

The circulation of news in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, and its impact upon political opinion, has begun to attract some attention among historians. It is widely accepted that the amount of published information about politics and current affairs was progressively increasing during these years, but argument remains as to the extent to which it influenced awareness and debate in the country at large. It seems likely that this burgeoning flow of news helped to shape the views of those who had access to it and perhaps contributed to a general politicization of certain sections of the nation, even if the practical effects of this are uncertain.

Studies of news and politics have inevitably focused upon those who made up the ‘political nation’, broadly defined: the members of both houses of parliament, the governors of counties and towns, and the enfranchised classes in the constituencies. It was these groups who wrote and received the newsletters that reported major events in London and elsewhere, who had access to the ‘separates’ which by the 1580s were providing transcriptions of parliamentary speeches, or who may have read the ‘corantos’ which in the 1620s were printing foreign news.¹ However, the experience of those at the

* I should like to thank Keith Wrightson, Alastair Bellany and Wallace MacCaffrey for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

¹ See, for example, Derek Hirst, *The representative of the people? Voters and voting in England under the early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1975), ch. 9; J. S. Morrill, ‘William Davenport and the “silent majority” of early Stuart England’, *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society*, LVIII (1975), 115–29; F. J. Levy, ‘How information spread among the gentry, 1550–1640’, *Journal of British Studies*, XXI (1982),

lower social levels, that majority outside formal political processes, excluded from the electorate, and on the margins of literacy, has been largely ignored. The consciousness and opinions of most ordinary people have usually been regarded as irrelevant by historians of 'high' politics, or else as simply too difficult to find and recreate, leaving as they do so few traces. Since it has often been believed that even the views of those who comprised the 'political nation' lacked sophistication, coherence and consistency for much of this period, it has scarcely been thought worth investigating the mental world of those considered by many contemporaries to be 'the vulgar and ignorant multitude'.

It is both unnecessary and unwise, however, to ignore the opinions of the great bulk of the population at this time and the networks of communication which informed them. For the evidence suggests that, despite inferior access to the organs of news in script and print, humble men and women in the provinces could be surprisingly well informed and, moreover, that the force of their views might be significant. The growth of written reporting should not be allowed to obscure the fact that, as Richard Cust has recognized, 'the commonest method of passing on news remained word of mouth'.² As such it was available to all, regardless of status or literacy. People at every level of society gathered and recycled information by the traditional methods of oral exchange based upon personal contact. To this extent, then, everyone had the chance to hear about and talk of current affairs. Of course, verbal intelligence was highly prone to distortions and inaccuracies, but since the written news, upon which so much discussion was ultimately based, could scarcely be more reliable at this time, there was often little qualitative difference between the sources of the educated elite and those readily available to the lower orders.

The content of this popular newsmongering should concern historians, moreover, for in a society as complex and variegated as early modern England it is not possible to understand the national significance of political processes at the centre without also appreciating their social and regional depth. Most importantly, it should matter now because it clearly mattered so much to contemporaries. The views of the multitude were of sufficient concern to Elizabethan and early Stuart governments to inspire the instruments of policy and police which produced the records which now make the recovery of those views possible. The prosecution of people for speaking seditious words and for spreading false rumours provides the sources which enable us to penetrate beneath the letters, 'news-diaries' and common-place books of the gentry and down into the world of everyday gossip at the market, on the road and in the alehouse.

11–34; Richard Cust, 'News and politics in early seventeenth-century England', *Past & Present*, cxii (1986), 60–90; Thomas Cogswell, 'The politics of propaganda: Charles I and the people in the 1620s', *Journal of British Studies*, xxix (1990), 187–215; Pauline Croft, 'The reputation of Robert Cecil: libels, political opinion and popular awareness in the early seventeenth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 1 (1991), 43–69.

² Cust, 'News and politics in early seventeenth-century England', p. 65.

I

Since the attempts by Thomas Cromwell to impose religious and doctrinal conformity in the years after the Reformation, the crown and its ministers had been especially concerned to suppress treasonable and seditious talk among the people. The law of treason, under which it was an offence to act, write or speak in a manner tending to the overthrow of royal authority, was founded on the statute of 1352. It was progressively extended in scope during the sixteenth century by acts of 1534, 1552, 1554, 1571 and 1585. In addition, under statutes of 1275, 1378 and 1388, it was also an offence to utter words considered to be seditious, that is, speeches that impugned the person of the monarch or spread false rumours which might sow discord between government and people. New legislation in 1555 imposed heavy punishments of pillory and fine for speaking 'false, sedicious and sclaunderous news, rumours, sayenges and tales, ageynst our most dreadd sovereygne lorde and king, and ageynst our most naturall sovereygne ladye and quene... of whom we ar forbidden to thincke evill and muche more to speake evell'. In 1581 Elizabeth I made the authorship of any seditious writing, and a second conviction for uttering seditious words, capital offences without benefit of clergy. The perceived dangers to the realm posed by the free speaking and irreverent chatter of the populace were reflected in repeated royal injunctions ordering its suppression, such as James I's proclamations against 'lavish and licentious speech of matters of state'.³

Born out of the political insecurities of these years, such measures reflected official anxieties over the effects of idle reports and subversive comment among the people. The 'vulgar', it was always said, were credulous and gullible in all that they heard, ever liable to misunderstand the truth of things, prone to distort them still further, hasty to judge and quick to criticise their betters. 'Howe redy vulgare peple ar to be abused by such and ar disposed to disperse sedycyous rumors thereby to procure troubles and mocons', wrote the queen to the earl of Shrewsbury during the Scottish disturbances of 1565. 'This is the vulgar sorte', the Devonshire justice, Lionel Sharpe, told Robert Cecil in April 1601, 'which ar carried more by rumors without an head, then by the truth of thinges.' When, in July 1628, Robert Melvill was imprisoned for repeating a seditious tale against the duke of Buckingham, he confessed to having been 'drawen by the reporte of the common people (which is *belluam multorum capitum*) into the vulgar error of the tyme'.⁴

³ 26 Henry VIII, c. 13; 1 & 2 Philip and Mary, c. 3; 23 Elizabeth, c. 2, in *Statutes of the realm* (11 vols., London, 1810-24), III, 508-9; IV, pt I, 240-1, 659-61; J. F. Larkin and P. J. Hughes, eds., *Stuart royal proclamations* (3 vols., Oxford, 1973), I, 495-6, 519-21. For discussion, see G. R. Elton, *Policy and police: the enforcement of the Reformation in the age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972), ch. 6; John Bellamy, *The Tudor law of treason: an introduction* (London, 1979), pp. 14, 27, 45-6, 84, 184; Roger B. Manning, 'The origin of the doctrine of sedition', *Albion*, XII (1980), 99-121.

⁴ Public Record Office, London (hereafter P.R.O.), SP15/12/73; P.R.O., SP12/279/62; P.R.O., SP16/110/13. For many other comments of this sort, see Christopher Hill, 'The many-headed monster', in his *Change and continuity in seventeenth-century England* (London, 1975) pp. 181-204.

Perhaps it was this customary fear of the beast with many heads and many mouths which accounts for the fact that the great majority of those accused at the assizes under the laws of sedition were drawn from the lower levels of society. There were, for example, 154 people known to have been so charged on the home circuit, covering the counties of Essex, Hertfordshire, Surrey, Sussex and Kent, during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. Of these, only 8 were described as gentlemen, 12 were clerics and 1 was a merchant: the remaining 86 per cent of indictments comprised 28 yeomen, 47 artisans, 10 husbandmen, 31 labourers, 11 women, 3 vagrants and 3 others.⁵ Although no records from any of the other five circuits survive from this period, transcripts of evidence in many cases of sedition were referred back to the privy council in London from assize meetings and summary procedures around the country and remain preserved in the state papers. These samples, which feature an equally large proportion of relatively humble people, help to make possible the piecing together not only of the communication networks by which the majority received their information nationwide, but also the substance of some of their loyalties and prejudices, values and beliefs.⁶

What emerges from such records is the frequent ability of people to talk about political events and issues and the apparent alacrity with which they were prepared to do so. Whenever two or more met together, it seems, the conversation was likely to turn to the state of the nation. To the authorities, of course, even the very consideration of such matters, hardly the business of the common people, was reprehensible. In 1599, Lord Keeper Egerton could lament the late increase of those who, ‘at ordinaries and common tables, wheare they have scarce mony to paye for their dynner, enter politique discourses of princes, kingdoms and estates and of counsells and counsellors, censuring everie one according to their owne discontented and malicious humours without regard of religion, conscience or honestie’. ‘I cann[ot] come into meeting but I find the predominant humour to be talking of the warres of Christendome, the honor of their country and such like treasons’, one pamphleteer feigned to protest in 1621, ‘and would to God they would stop their mouthes and prophane noe more the thinges that are above them.’⁷ This appetite for political discussion was clearly fuelled by a parallel hunger to discover the latest information about affairs within the realm and beyond. In lieu of reliable access to written sources, this usually meant asking for news of anyone well met.

⁵ P.R.O., ASSI35/1-67. These indictments are calendared in J. S. Cockburn, ed., *Calendar of assize records* (10 vols., London, 1978-82).

⁶ For attempts to use cases of seditious words in order to gauge popular opinion, see Elton, *Policy and police*, passim; Joel Samaha, ‘Gleanings from local criminal-court records: sedition amongst the “inarticulate” in Elizabethan Essex’, *Journal of Social History*, VIII (1975), 61-79; Buchanan Sharp, *In contempt of all authority: rural artisans and riot in the west of England, 1586-1660* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), pp. 36-42; idem, ‘Popular political opinion in England 1660-1685’, *History of European Ideas*, x (1989), 13-29; Tim Harris, *London crowds in the reign of Charles II* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 50-1, 158, 161-3, 165-6, 213, 220-1; Dagmar Friest, ‘The formation of opinion and the communication network in London 1637 to c. 1645’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge 1992), pp. 159-264.

⁷ P.R.O., SP12/273/35; P.R.O., SP14/126/1.

II

Enquiry after the news was, thought John Florio in 1591, always the ‘first question of an Englishman’. It was this curiosity which, it seems, most often initiated conversation. ‘It is the language at first meetings used in all countries; what news?’ commented one seventeenth-century pamphlet. Indeed, it was a frequent lament among preachers that people were ever ready to discuss current affairs, but that they fell strangely silent when it came to talk of spiritual matters. They ‘rehearse and tell nothing but gossips tales, and news, that love to have their tongues to runne through the world, and meddling in other mans matters’, complained George Widley of his parishioners in Peterborough, ‘but if any question shall be put as concerning religion, they grow as mute as fishes’. Impart to them a piece of doctrine and they forget it as soon as they hear it, lamented William Harrison of his Lancashire flock in 1614; but ‘report to them a human historie, tell them some strange newes, or a tale for their worldly profit, or coporall health, they will keepe it well enough, and at any time, and in any company will relate it very readily’. The generality would do anything on a Sunday rather than be at church, as it seemed to Thomas Shepherd, preferring ‘to tel tales, and break lots at home, or (at best) to talk of foren or domestical news only to pass away the time, rather than to see God in his works and warn thereby’.⁸

The national and political news of the day circulated in much the same way as the domestic and personal gossip which was so rife in communities. Analysis of the records of defamation has made familiar that environment of chatter and rumour-mongering generated by the intimacy of small town and village life where privacy was typically scarce and people were encouraged to know the business of others. Allegations about people’s personal lives and sexual misdemeanours, accusations of behaviour which breached community norms, all thrived as news in such a setting. “‘I will tell you some news...’”, leered Edmund Serjeant as he left a wheelwright’s shop at Stanton St. Quintin, Wiltshire, in 1623. “‘The Sparrow hath begotten Mag Bird with child... She sits now at Hullavington and will hatch very shortly.’” Behind any such tale told to the authorities of church or state was this undercurrent and atmosphere of public gossip. Very often, irregularities came to the ears of churchwardens and constables simply on the basis of communal suspicion, the notion of the ‘common fame’, or ‘common voice’, which could be sufficient basis for a presentment. Individuals were frequently charged with the spreading or ‘gadding’ of gossip of a kind likely to cause trouble within families and between neighbours. There were many like Elizabeth Hunt from Jacobean Essex, ‘a common gadinge gossip from house to house, leaving tales and newes’; or her

⁸ John Florio, *Florios second frutes* (London, 1591), sig. A2; Margaret Spufford, *Small books and pleasant histories: popular fiction and its readership in seventeenth-century England* (London, 1981), p. 65; George Widley, *The doctrine of the sabbath* (London, 1604), p. 114; William Harrison, *The difference of hearers* (London, 1614), p. 39; Thomas Shepherd *These sabbaticae* (London, 1655), p. 314; and cf. Robert Burton, *The anatomy of melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (3 vols., London, 1932), I, 320.

contemporary, Nicholas Baily of Cambridgeshire, ‘a sower of discord... in raising and speaking of divers slanderous crimes and speaches betwene neighbor and neighbor’. Particularly effective in tale-bearing, especially between communities, were those who travelled in the course of their business, like Alice Bennet, ‘a very poore woman’ from Oxfordshire, described in 1604 as one who ‘goeth abroad to sell sope and candels from towne to towne to get her lyving and she useth to carrie tales betwene neighboures’.⁹

For news of a larger significance and a wider import, these mechanisms of transmission worked no less. Professional carriers, chapmen and travelling tradespeople were often discovered to be the factors and brokers of news, circulating information and spinning webs of communication in ways which few other sources could provide. ‘I bring nothing, except those things which are tossed up and down in barber’s shops, in carrier waggons, and in ships’, says one dialogue character of the news. John Bradburie of Oxford was not unusual in that ‘being a taylor and not free of the towne’, and thus ‘driven to bee moste abrode for [his] living’, he was often employed, it was said in 1584, as ‘a man that vseth to goe of messages for gentlemen’. He fell under the same suspicion as Edward Lymwoode, a petty chapman from Ongar in Essex, indicted two years later as ‘a comon spredder of newes and such false rumours’ concerning the fortunes of the queen’s fleet. Equally, in 1592 a pedlar called Peale was caught wandering around Litchfield in Hampshire uttering ‘certain lewde speeches tending to treason’.¹⁰

The value of those who travelled around on business as purveyors of news and disseminators of information is well illustrated by the way in which intelligence was spread and support solicited for the planned uprising in Oxfordshire at the end of 1596. In November, Roger Ibill confessed to having ‘harde latelie divers poore people saie (as he traveilled in this countie, beinge a loader to Hampton Gaie mill) that the prices of corne weare so deere that there would be shortlie a risinge of the people...’; Roger Symmonds, carpenter, claimed to have heard much the same, ‘commonly as he went to marketts’. News of these murmerings passed quickly on the grapevine. Of Richard Bradshaw it was said that he, ‘being a miller and traveling the countrie, took uppon him to persuade dyvers to ioyne with them’; his brother James, also a

⁹ Martin Ingram, *Church courts, sex and marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 305; Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Lang. e. 6., fo. 65v; Cambridge University Library, EDR/B2/21, fo. 50; Oxfordshire Record Office, ODR c. 24, fo. 219.

¹⁰ Desiderius Erasmus, *The colloquies or familiar discourses of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans. H.M. (London, 1671), p. 51; E. R. C. Brinkworth, ed., *The archdeacon’s court: liber actorum, 1584* (2 vols., Oxfordshire Record Society, 23–4, Oxford, 1942–6), 1, 131; Historical Manuscripts Commission (hereafter H.M.C.), *10th report appendix part iv* (London, 1885), p. 481 and F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan life: disorder* (Chelmsford, 1970), p. 56; *Acts of the privy council of England, 1542–1631* (46 vols., London, 1890–1964), (hereafter, *A.P.C.*), 1591–92, p. 410; P.R.O., SP16/317/16. For remarks on the relationship between carriers and news, see J. Crofts, *Packhorse, waggon and post: land carriage and communications under the Tudors and Stuarts* (London, 1967), pp. 20–1; R. W. Scribner, ‘Oral culture and the diffusion of Reformation ideas’, *History of European Ideas*, v (1984), 237–56; M. C. Frearson, ‘The English corantos of the 1620s’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1993), ch. 1.

millar, had met Richard Heath in the street at Yarnton ‘and being asked “What news?”’ replied that ‘he knewe a hundred good fellowes that rather then they would be starved they would ryse’. Bartholomew Steer, another carpenter and an initiator of the plot, had ‘saide that he would ride and goe and use all the meanes which he could’ to apprise others of their cause.¹¹

Indeed, a principal motive behind official concern over vagrants and wandering beggars throughout this period was the danger which they posed in the spreading of seditious rumours prejudicial to the stability of government and religion. As early as June 1554, the civic authorities in York were taking ‘especiall regarde to vacabonds’ as those likely to ‘spriede any vagne prophesies, sediciouse, false and untrue rumours’. In 1593 the privy council drew up one of a number of draft bills, amid fears over missionary priests and foreign spies, ‘for restraining and punishing vagrant and seditious persons, who under pretence of conscience and religion corrupt and seduce the queen’s subjects’. As political tension mounted in 1640, there was particular concern about beggars and the unemployed who, it was believed, ‘in tymes of suspition or trouble may by tales and false rumours distracte the people’s minds’. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when, at the end of the seventeenth century, the godly Richard Baxter came to reflect upon those people who experience predicted were most likely to ‘raise any army to extripate knowledge and religion’, it was to itinerents and illiterates that he looked accusingly: ‘the tinkers, sowgawters and cratcarryers and beggars and bargemen and all the rabble that cannot reade’.¹²

In particular, traders and travellers were facilitators of information by word of mouth in so far as they had regular contact with London, the centre in which most news was generated and the origin of much political speculation. Around the Royal Exchange, along Cheapside to St. Paul’s churchyard and walk, in the taverns and inns which lined Fleet Street and the Strand on the way towards Westminster Hall, the latest news could be found on everyone’s lips. ‘Men will tell you more than all the world, betwixt the Exchange, Pauls and Westminster’, commented one visitor in 1631. The Exchange was the great entrepôt where factors and merchants met from around the country and over the seas. In addition to trade, it was said, ‘they all desire newes’. Paul’s walk was no less the locus of information swapped, tales told and rumour gestated. ‘The noyse in it is like that of bees’, mused John Earle in 1628, ‘a

¹¹ P.R.O., SP12/261/10ii, 12/262/4, 12/261/15iv, and see John Walter, ‘A “rising of the people”? The Oxfordshire rising of 1596’, *Past & Present*, cvii (1985), p. 97.

¹² Angelo Raine, ed., *York civic records* (8 vols., Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Wakefield, 1939–53), v, 107; H.M.C., *4th report* (London, 1874), p. 115; P.R.O., SP16/456/13; Frederick J. Powick, ed. ‘The reverend Richard Baxter’s last treatise’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, x (1926), 182. For other examples, see P.R.O., SP12/60/1; P.R.O., SP12/60/27; P.R.O., SP12/272/48; P.R.O., SP15/12/74; P.R.O., SP14/72/31. On the association of vagrancy and sedition, see Alan Everitt, ‘Farm labourers’, repr. in Christopher Clay, ed., *Rural society: landowners, peasants and labourers, 1500–1750* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 228; Christopher Hill, *The world turned upside down: radical ideas during the English revolution* (London, 1972), pp. 39, 45; A. L. Beier, *Masterless men: the vagrancy problem in England, 1560–1640* (London, 1985), pp. 139–42.

strange humming or buzze, mixt of walking, tongues, and feet... It is the great exchange of all discourse, and no business whatsoever but is here stirring and a foot... It is the generall mint of all famous lies', while many 'turne merchants here, and trafficke for newes'. This oral communication was the quickest and often the best or only available source of news; in lieu of other more reliable media, 'the means only lefte is to wayte at Powles or the Exchange for some communication of some ould acquayntance', as one Elizabethan put it.¹³

If the principal frequenters of the Exchange and the majority of 'Paul's walkers' were merchants and gentlemen, politicians and diplomats, these centres were not entirely socially exclusive. Young servants and apprentices, for example, seem often to have been sent to pick up news for their masters or to save them places at sermons and readings at Paul's cross. One such was Vernon Ferrar, a servant who was sitting at the cross on a Sunday morning in May 1629, 'keeping a place for his master as he usually doth', when he heard another 'young youth' read aloud from a libel against the king in front of the assembled crowd. From there, such youngsters could carry this information throughout the alleys and tenements, along the thoroughfares and into the shops where people gadded and gossiped. Young Stephen Plunket got into trouble in March 1624 for repeating one piece of news, 'and for his author can produce no other but comon rumor as he (being a boy) passed to and fro about the streets'. Equally, servants from outside the capital might have access to Paul's news through their masters or superiors and it could filter back to the localities through such channels. In March 1587, for example, another servant, Lawrence Perry, was heard repeating some false news at the house of a neighbour in Essex which clearly originated from 'Paules church, where his maister is accustomed daillie to walke'. In April 1600, George Clifford from Fotherby in north east Lincolnshire, was questioned about the rumour-mongering activities of his uncle Richard Thimblebie, with whom he had come to lodge in Aldersgate Street, London, and he confessed to having noticed how he would 'goeth daillie forth unto ordynaries' and that 'he hath often seene him walking in Powles'.¹⁴

Another vehicle through which news and rumour could be transmitted out from these centres of information was provided by the watermen who ferried 'walkers' across the Thames from Paul's wharf to the Bankside in Southwark. They would often pick up tit-bits of gossip from their passengers and could usually be relied upon to satisfy enquiries after the latest reports. During the

¹³ John Smith, *Advertisements for the unexperienced planters of New England* (London, 1631), sig. A2, quoted in H. S. Bennett, *English books and readers, 1603 to 1640* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 179; Donald Lupton, *London and the country carbonadoed and quartred into severall characters* (London, 1932), p. 24; John Earle, *Micro-cosmographie. Or, a peece of the world discovered: in essayes and characters* (London, 1928), sigs. K1r-K3r; P.R.O., SP12/239/26. In 1632, the 'foryners and strangers' who frequented Paul's churchyard were described as being 'for the most part men of greater sort and qualitie'; the noise they made on a Sunday in 'walkinge and talkinge' was said to disturb divine service: P.R.O., SP16/214/94.

¹⁴ P.R.O., SP16/142/102; P.R.O., SP14/185/95; P.R.O., SP12/199/14; P.R.O., SP12/274/113.

rising of the Northern Earls in December 1569, for example, Harry Shadwell heard, at the Bull's Head in Cheapside, various rumours concerning the duke of Alba and was subsequently told by his sculler from Paul's wharf that 10,000 Scots had joined the rebels, but that most were slain. On the same day, another waterman, Richard Whittarnes, also relayed this tale to two passengers whom he took across to Bear Garden 'beeinge demanded by one of them, "What newes out of the northe?"'. In February 1606 Thomas East was interrogated about some speches touching 'treason intended against his majestie or the state' which he heard from a passenger in his wherry coming back in the other direction, from Horsehead Down stairs to Tower wharf stairs in London. On their journey over to Southwark one evening in May 1627, John Poole, a tanner, and John Cole, a silkweaver, fell to talking with various others about news of the duke of Buckingham's expedition to Rochelle, before one of the company was heard to speak ill-advisedly of the king and his favourite.¹⁵

In general, London acted as a magnet, drawing in visitors and their news stories from around the country and then radiating them out once again. People flocked to Paul's or the Exchange in search of the latest information to take back home. Travelling back and forth on the road between London and Deal on the Kent coast during October 1639, the great adventurer Peter Mundy kept 'meeting many lords, knightts [and] gentry posting and riding to and fro, some about businesse, butt most to see and hear newes. For this latter purpose went multitudes of the common sort'. At the same time, the inhabitants of the hundred of Berkeley in Gloucestershire could see the news arriving in the form of the returning tradesmen appearing over Simondshall Hill on the Cotswold edge. John Smyth of Nibley mused that, 'The clothiers, horscarriers and wainmen of this hundred who weekly frequent London, knowing by ancient custome, that the first question, (after welcome home from London) is "What newes at London?"' doe vsually gull vs with feigned inventions, divised by them vpon those downes; which wee either then suspectinge vpon the report, or after findinge false, wee cry out, "Simondshall newes!". A generall speach betweene each cobblers teeth'.¹⁶

Indeed, the roads and highways, and the inns and hostelries up and down the country rang out with that question to travellers from the capital. Typically, when William Frauncis, a smith, got back to Hatfield Broad Oak in Essex, in February 1587, his neighbours asked him "'What newes at London?'". At this, he relayed the rumour which had come to his ears 'that there was one in the Tower which sayeth he is King Edward'. More of this kind of speculation was heard in London early in May 1630 by Joseph Hall, a tailor from Newhall in Cheshire. After the three days' ride home he was asked by various of the locals "'What newes at London?'", to which he replied that 'itt

¹⁵ P.R.O., SP12/60/48, 12/60/49, 12/60/54; P.R.O., SP14/18/65; P.R.O., SP16/63/113.

¹⁶ Peter Mundy, *The travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608–1667*, eds. Sir Richard Carnac Temple and Lavinia Mary Anstey (5 vols., in 6, Hakluyt Society, 2nd ser., Cambridge, 1907; London, 1914–36), iv, 41; John Smyth, *A description of the hundred of Berkeley in the county of Gloucester and of its inhabitants*, ed. Sir John Maclean (Gloucester, 1885), p. 30.

was spoken in divers places' that the king 'was in the Tower and that there was an other to bee in his place'. During the mounting political tension in the spring of 1639, Edward Thursby from Pattiswick in Essex travelled down to the capital 'about some occasions of his owne and... there he heard some newes concerning the Scottish business'. It was generally 'spoken about the towne' and in particular, 'Rowland Keely, a taylor dwelling about Sheere Lane, told it him and reported it to him for truth', which, on his return, 'made [him] tell it with the more confidence'.¹⁷

London was also the principal centre of foreign news which was taken back to the provinces in the same way. This became particularly evident in the early 1620s as interest in events abroad rose over negotiations for the Spanish match and during the Thirty Years War. One Friday early in March 1620, for example, Issack Forrester was in Dolberry's Inn at Poole in Dorset when, as a carrier, he was naturally asked by his host 'what newes he heard from London'. He relayed a report, which he claimed to have had a fortnight before from the parson of Durweston 'who then was newly come from London', who had said 'that he heard att London that the match betweene the prince and the king of Spaines daughter was concluded on and that the Palsgrave had sent lettres to our king to know his pleasure whether he should undertake the crown of Bohemia and that the same lettres were intercepted and an aunswere... was sent back... that he should use his discretion...'. On the evening of Saturday 17 December later that year, Alexander Whillegge, yeoman of North Petherton in Somerset, was having a drink at John Harris' alehouse in Bridgwater with Edward Cadwallider who, during their conversation, asked 'what news there was at London out of Bohemia or from the Palatine (the saide Whillegge cominge lately before from London)'. The reply came back that the generals Ambrogio Spinola and the count of Bucquoy were both reported to be dead.¹⁸

But London was not, of course, the only concentration of people and gossip to act as a dynamic facilitator of information. Provincial towns could also serve as focal points, attracting London news to their market places and taverns and then spinning it out through the small towns and villages of the countryside. In the little Essex village of Aldham the locals looked to Colchester as their closest major entrepôt. Certainly, when Thomas Wendon, a servant, passed a group of his neighbours sitting on a bench outside Rafe North's door one Saturday in June 1596, he 'asked if any manne there had bene at Colchester that day and what newes they heard there'. At the beginning of July 1635, John Berisford of Eagle Hall in Lincolnshire went across to Newark where troops had been mustering for the king; the following day in the kitchen of his neighbour, John Mounson, he was asked "'What newes at Newark?'". When in May 1640

¹⁷ P.R.O., ASS135/29/1/33; P.R.O., SP16/163/61, 16/166/43; P.R.O., SP16/422/80.

¹⁸ P.R.O., SP14/121/90i-iv; P.R.O., SP14/118/37, 14/118/38. For a discussion of the newsbooks produced on these events and some of the reactions that they evoked, see M. A. Breslow, *A mirror of England: English puritan views of foreign nations, 1618-1640* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 10-22, 63-71. The circulation of such news in the West Country is evident in the diary of the Devonshire gentleman, Walter Yonge: George Roberts, ed., *Diary of Walter Yonge, esq.* (Canadian Society, 1st ser., xli, London, 1848), pp. 33-7.

Thomas Webb, a clothier from Devizes in Wiltshire, was at market in Maiden Bradley he met William Collyer of Bristol, a starchmaker, who wanted to buy his horse. Webb mentioned that he had brought the animal from the capital, at which Collyer asked 'what newes there were at London', before proceeding to tell of 'newes in Bristoll that the lord archbishop of Canterbury was turned papist and that the king and his jester had found the crosse and the crucifix in his breast'. Webb claimed to have also heard the same rumour two months later when he was overtaken on the Kingston to Wanting road by William Horne, a husbandman from South Fawley in Berkshire, and they had each asked of the other 'what newes was in their country'.¹⁹

The many people, who, like Webb, Collyer and Horne, travelled the trade routes and followed the marketing networks, provided vital communication links from town to town and between commercial centres and their outlying areas. Fairs and markets were melting pots of rumour and gossip, to which farmers and manufacturers, merchants and pedlars came from far and wide to listen for news and pass on reports as they did their business. In November 1625, for example, a Northumbrian labourer, Christopher Hogg, was returning home from Norfolk when he was overtaken on the road in Yorkshire by a clergyman, Martin Danby, who asked him 'what news there was in the south'. Hogg told him that the duke of Buckingham and the earl of Rutland had been imprisoned for attempting to poison the king, 'all of which he saith he heard privatelie rumord in Hempton in Norfolk wheare he had then bene driving beasts to the faire'.²⁰

Such travellers left their news at the hostelries in which they stopped and from these social centres it could spread into outlying areas as the chain of oral communication was set in motion. One rumour, that as a result of the king's forthcoming visit to Scotland there would be presently a bloodthirsty rising of the papists, was filtered through the Angel Inn at Stilton, Huntingdonshire, in the spring of 1633. At the beginning of April a travelling Scotsman had called there and told this tale. It was overheard by the ostler who confided it to other customers. One of them was Robert Johnson who passed the news on to his brother-in-law, Richard Sawyer of near-by Holme. Sawyer, in turn, told his son, Henry, who was soon after working for Lady Digby in Lathbury field outside Gayhurst in Buckinghamshire, when two Hanslope men passed by on their way from market in Newport Pagnell and enquired 'what newse hee did heare abrowde'. Young Sawyer let them know the shocking story, adding that the Digbys, known papists, had been stock-piling arms. 'I have hard birds singe so', he said, but insisted that although his sources were reputable, 'non of the smaller but of the better sorte', he 'would not be called in question for these words willinglye'. When one of the men, husbandman Christopher Courssey, later met his neighbour, John Cooke, and was asked 'what was the news at Newport', he passed on the report once again. Cooke

¹⁹ P.R.O., SP12/259/51; P.R.O., SP16/293/72; P.R.O., SP16/456/36, 16/461/46ii.

²⁰ P.R.O., SP16/10/33, 16/10/55, 16/12/54, 16/21/61.

then went to the minister of Hanslope with this information and in due course a group of neighbours from the village was dispatched to search for young Sawyer. One of this number was subsequently dining with a friend over at Cosgrove in Northamptonshire when he told the assembled company of the report, and before long it was all over that county too. Henry Wilde, the rector of Alderton, heard it and informed the mayor of Northampton, advising that ‘newes to that purpose, although with litle grounds, I find in the mouths of so many’. So it was that a passing remark at an inn could spark a sequence of exchange which might send several neighbouring counties into panic.²¹

Thus, the many inns and ordinaries, taverns and alehouses that sat along highways and littered towns and villages nationwide were crucial in collecting and distributing the flow of news. The number of alehouses in the provinces alone was estimated to be at least 25,000–26,000 in 1636. In such places travellers with tales to tell rested overnight, people met together to discuss current affairs, keepers and landlords often made it their business to keep abreast of the latest reports. There were many hostelries, like the alehouse kept by John Welchman at Dadington in Oxfordshire in the 1580s, where the host would stimulate trade by gathering information as he travelled around the countryside, before returning to relay it to eager paying customers ‘being desyrous to heare some newes’. Everyone must have known a local drinking establishment where it was possible to go and hear the latest stories coming from London. It is hardly surprising that they were considered by the authorities to be the ‘nurseries of sedition’, for here the state of the nation was debated and opinions were expressed over cups, some of which may have come to be regretted in the light of sobriety.²²

But alehouses such as John Welchman’s were also important news centres in that, as well as circulating oral reports, they also acted as provincial post offices where carriers and messengers both picked up and deposited letters for collection. The provincial gentry had long received reports on affairs in London and around the nation via the private correspondence of their friends in the capital. ‘Powles newes’, William Sterrell wrote to Thomas Phelippes in April 1593, was ‘sufficient allwayes to furnishe a letter with’. A professional postman or else a travelling trader might then be employed to distribute it. An example of the latter was Francis Barrett of Dover, ‘a poore stragling fellowe, and by profession a sayler’ who called one Sunday night in December 1633 at the alehouse of John and Alice Brewer in Witham, Essex. Having come through London he was asked, naturally, what news he had, and during the ensuing conversation he mentioned, or so the Brewers claimed, ‘that hee had been a letter carrier for the space of sixteene years last past and that hee had carried divers letters for noblemen and gentlemen’. Barratt later denied that he

²¹ P.R.O., SP16/237/27-30, 16/237/42, 16/237/45, 16/237/60i-iv, 16/238/33i-ii, 16/239/61i-iv, 16/239/85. For discussion of the many rumours about papists rising, see Robin Clifton, ‘The popular fear of catholics during the English revolution’, *Past & Present*, LII (1971), 23–55.

²² P.R.O., SP16/321/19; Brinkworth, ed., *The archdeacon’s court*, I, 152; Peter Clark, *The English alehouse: a social history, 1200–1830* (London, 1983), p. 145.

was 'ever employed as a carrier or post to carrie letters', saying only that 'upon occasion, passeing from one place to another, he hath been intreated to carry sometimes a letter as a friend and not otherwise'. Interestingly, he claimed never to know the contents of such correspondence, not being able to read hand writing nor 'anie other hande then printed hande'.²³

Most such carriers of letters only appear in the records when they were suspected of transmitting some dangerous correspondence and were apprehended by justices as they travelled the roads and entered the hostleries across the country. Thus, Cornishman John Penrose, servant to John Arundell of Lawhitton and 'a man of meane estate and condicion', was interrogated in February 1606 as 'an intelligencer to and from London to recusants'. In September 1625, William Emerson, a shearman of Cardington in Bedfordshire, was arrested while passing through Buckinghamshire with seditious letters; he had met a local labourer on the road to whom he had foolishly mentioned that he was on his way from Suffolk, via Cambridge and Northamptonshire, towards Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire, from whence he would continue on into Gloucestershire, saying 'that he was sent from one nobleman to another about the papists buisenes to knowe their mynds'.²⁴

Although people at the lower social levels probably did not send and receive letters as often as those of more gentle and educated station, they were by no means cut off from access to them at either first or second hand. Friends or relatives in London, who were able to write or to employ someone who could, might send home private correspondence, news from which would pass into oral circulation back in the provinces. One letter from a London apprentice back to his parents in Wigan, Lancashire, worked in just this way. Mathew Mason was bound to 'one that selleth bandes and cambricks' at the sign of the Falcon in the Poultry, London, when he wrote home on 12 March 1619. Amid personal wishes he decided to include details of one report circulating on the streets of the capital.

This I thought it fitt to lett you here of our hearthes newes. I have but litle but that there is like to be great changing in England. Many strange wonders about London. There is a hand and a sword risen out of the ground at a towne called Newmarkett, where the King is, and stands strikeing at him. And the Kinge went to see it and ever since hee hath kepte his chamber and cannott tell what it meanes; and other strange things which nowe I will not speake of.

Thus written, the young apprentice gave his letter to a porter for delivery to William Hyton, 'a comon carryer betweene Lancashire and London'. About twelve days later, Hyton handed it to Gilbert Mason of Wigan, tanner, Mathew's father. He shewed it to the deputy Mayor of the town, to Mr Peter Marsh and to others 'as a letter of newes'; his wife, Margaret, 'lent it out'

²³ Brinkworth, ed., *The archdeacon's court*, 1, 230; P.R.O., SP12/244/123; P.R.O., SP16/252/671-ii.

²⁴ P.R.O., SP14/18/73; P.R.O., SP16/6/68i. A proclamation of 1607 forbade any unauthorized person from carrying packets or letters: P.R.O., SP14/45/50. The postmaster of Ware, Hertfordshire, was reprovved for failure to observe this in July 1617: P.R.O., SP14/92/100.

among the neighbours and it soon became public property. Transcripts were made for distribution; another of the Mason children 'did take the said letter and plaistered it on a chiste' for all to see; other copies were read aloud in the streets. Peter Green, yeoman, saw Roger Bulloughe, shoemaker, poring over a version and, asking to have a look at it himself, he read it aloud 'openly in the streets in Wigan'.²⁵

Another private letter, to a gentleman of Foulsham in Norfolk, was publicised by being copied and dispersed in the streets of Norwich during the Lent assizes of 1627. It hinted that an army of papists was preparing to land at Weybourne on the north Norfolk coast before May Day next. One copy was found by the wife of Thomas Owdman of Cawston, tanner, and she took it to 'ould Powell of Cawston to read for her' and, 'because hee could not read it', she gave it to a schoolboy, Edward Lombe, who passed it, in turn, to his fellow, Henry Rychers. John Rychers reported the letter given to his son in the knowledge that 'the scattering and spreding of such scrolls and rumors is seditious and the more dayngerous nowe because the countie is possessed with a reporte that 11 tall ships manned with 2,000 old land soldiers under the command of experienced captaynes laye lately readie to put out of Dunkirke'. He feared that this second story might 'breed some disquiett among the people that are allreadie discontented', and yet he was worried that it appeared to have been largely ignored, 'thinkinge that yf the intelligence that was given of the gunpowder treason had bene thus past over in what lamentable case this kingdome had bene'. Meanwhile, another copy of the letter was found in a Norwich shop by a preacher of Wymondham who sent a transcript of it to a friend at Westminster 'for great news'. With this, the report was returned to its likely point of origin, neatly demonstrating the reciprocal traffic of news from London to the provinces and back again.²⁶

By the second half of Elizabeth's reign, correspondence of this sort was being increasingly supplemented by more formal and sometimes professionally written newsletters emanating from London. Both kinds of material, together with manuscript 'separates' and printed newsbooks could be delivered via inns and alehouses. As time went on, such material was ever more likely to structure the contents of oral newsmongering as the verbal and written realms fed in and out of each other in mutually reinforcing ways. Formal newsletters were often posted up in public in market towns where readers could make their contents known to the crowds who gathered around them, while others were publicly pronounced by criers or interested parties. In the 1620s, for instance, the Suffolk clergyman John Rous would make regular trips into Norfolk to find the latest proclamations and bills pinned on the corner post at the Bell inn in Thetford or pasted up in the saddler's shop at Walton. In 1634 it was said of the sectary, Thomas Cotton of West Bergholt in Essex, 'a greate depravour of

²⁵ P.R.O., SP14/107/66i-v. For a similar example, involving a seditious letter sent from a son in London via the carrier to his father in Leicestershire during May 1637, see P.R.O., SP16/357/102i-iii.

²⁶ P.R.O., SP16/60/25i-iii, 16/60/26.

government', that 'he maintaines some pevish intelligencer in London weekly to send him the newse of the time, which he usually reades in the streets every market daye att Colchester, about whom the zealouts thronge as people use where balletts are sunge'.²⁷

Ballads, either in printed or manuscript form, provided another written source of largely London provenance which also entered into oral circulation and were regularly posted or hawked across the country. Visitors to the capital could hear the latest news in this form, both performed by professional minstrels and chanted in cruder rhymes alike. The Dorchester gentleman, William Whiteway, was in the capital in September 1623, during the Spanish expedition of the duke of Buckingham and Prince Charles, when 'there came newes of the prince his arrivall at Portesmouth, and ballads were made of it, but it proved false; the balladsingers were sent to prison'. Perhaps Whiteway took a copy of a ballad back to Dorset, like the Kentish man 'lately come from London' in May 1626 who broadcast a composition about the duke around Sandwich. Other newsmongers in the localities were sent such material for distribution; in the spring of 1627, for example, rumours of plots against the government were flying around Staffordshire, thanks to John Iremonger who was found dispersing two dangerous papers, claiming that 'he received them as London newes most ordinary, the one as a songe usually sunge by fidders, the other as newes of the tyme'.²⁸

Through the same means, printed newsbooks might find their way into the hands or the hearing of ordinary provincial people. This was especially likely from the 1620s, which saw the increased publication of illicit news items dealing with both foreign and domestic affairs. Pamphlets like Thomas Scott's *Vox populi* were said to be 'audaciously...dispersed' and 'openly divulged' while there were

dyvers stationers soe soon as they heare of anie such bookes as have noe publicke authoritie they indeavour upon whatsoever condicon to get them in their hands and hyres some younge fellowes to transcribe them and sells them to suche nuefangle persons as will not spare anie charges for acqueiringe such trashe as infatuats the foolishe vulgar with a misprision of lost actions and with which they ought not to medle.

It was such material which prompted Sir Thomas Wilson to recommend in

²⁷ Mary Anne Everett Green, ed., *Diary of John Rous, incumbent of Santon Downham, Suffolk, from 1625 to 1642* (Camden Society, 1st ser., LXVI, London, 1856), 10–11, 34, 37; P.R.O., SP16/276/42; and see William Hunt, *The puritan moment: the coming of revolution in an English county* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 261–2; Cust, 'News and politics in early seventeenth-century England', pp. 65–6.

²⁸ *William Whiteway of Dorchester: his diary, 1618 to 1635* (Dorset Record Society, XII, Dorchester, 1991), p. 54; P.R.O., SP16/27/80; P.R.O., SP16/64/11, and *Acts of the Privy Council [A.P.C.]*, 1627, p. 301. For the circulation of such ballads in Suffolk, see Everett Green, ed., *Diary of John Rous*, pp. 18–22, 29–30, 31. On news items in printed ballads, see Hyder E. Rollins, 'The black-letter broadside ballad', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, xxxiv (1919), 265–73, 295, 315–17, 335–6; Matthias A. Shaaber, *Some forerunners of the newspaper in England, 1476–1622* (Philadelphia, 1929).

1621 government authorized ‘gazetts weekly’ to furnish ‘the ploughman and the artisan’ with official versions of the news and thus prevent ‘rumors amongst the vulgar’. That year saw the first ‘corantos’ published in London and the flow of printed government propaganda appears to have been on the increase.²⁹

One example of royal apologetic, an apparently now lost work by Nicholas Breton, and one of the many pamphlets penned to mark the safe return of Charles and Buckingham from Spain in October 1623, was being read at an alehouse in Evesham, Worcestershire, on Friday 5 March 1625. It was then that John Brent, from near Wolverhampton, said to be ‘a comon carryer of letters betwene recusants’, called in at Richard Moore’s where he found John Tysoe, yeoman, together with the host who was reading a ‘small book’. Upon enquiry, Moore ‘shewed him the said book, the same being a smalle booke lately written by one Nicholas Britten and intitaled *Great Britain’s thankfulness to God for our peaceable king and the happy return of Prince Charles*’. Moore extolled its contents, ‘taking occasion to praise and magnifie God for the said prince’s return and for God’s blessing on this kingdom by the king and prince in the inioyning of the gospell theareuppon’. Brent’s reaction indicates that Catholics did not necessarily share in the mood of national euphoria which this incident had provoked, for ‘in shewe of dislike of such’ he asserted that he would rather have the king of Spain as his ruler.³⁰

Two months later a newsbook, informing the people of their new monarch’s progress, was clearly being discussed in King’s Lynn and around East Anglia. At Wisbech Henry Deane, a cordwainer, went into the shop of his colleague, William Eaton, on Wednesday 8 June. There he saw Robert Byrbacke at work and said to him ‘that he could tell him newes’. ‘“What news?”’ asked Byrbacke, to which Denne replied that Charles I was no more. At this Eaton ‘told him that he had seene a book at Linne wherin he reade how that the king was gone to Greenwich’. ‘“I thanke God it is not as it was reported”’, replied Denne, ‘“for it is reported that the king is dead”’. This printed news did not prevent Denne telling James Thompson, labourer, and John Stanion, apothecary, on Friday, that the king had been ‘made away within these three dayes’; Thompson, in turn, told Richard Tyllney.³¹

²⁹ P.R.O., SP14/118/102–3; P.R.O., SP14/124/113. On Scott’s pamphlets and their impact, see S. L. Adams, ‘Captain Thomas Gainsford, the *Vox spiritus* and the *Vox populi*’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, XLIX (1976), 141–4; P. G. Lake, ‘Constitutional consensus and puritan opposition in the 1620s: Thomas Scott and the Spanish match’, *Historical Journal*, xxv (1982), 805–25. On the development of the printed newsbooks, see Joseph Frank, *The beginnings of the English newspaper, 1620–1660* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961); Laurence Hanson, ‘English newsbooks, 1620–1641’, *The Library*, 4th ser., xviii (1938), 355–84; Frearson, ‘The English corantos of the 1620s’.

³⁰ P.R.O., SP14/160/73i. This is either an unknown work by Breton, or else a misattribution of one of the many pamphlets that were written on this subject, such as: John Taylor, *Prince Charles his welcome from Spaine* (London, 1623, S.T.C., 23789.7); Anon, *The joyfull returne, of the most illustrious prince, Charles* (London, 1623, S.T.C. 5025). For a discussion of this episode and the literature which it provoked, see David Cressy, *Bonfires and bells: national memory and the protestant calendar in Elizabethan and early Stuart England* (London, 1989), ch. 6.

³¹ P.R.O., SP16/3/53i–v.

III

Such rumours about the death of the monarch were an endemic feature of popular political discussion in early modern England. It is usually difficult to identify whether the sources of these apocryphal reports were oral or written in the first instance, but it is clear that their circulation was essentially by word of mouth. In an environment in which all news stories were difficult to verify, few people had an accurate idea of recent events, and political insecurity was a constant, it is hardly surprising that wild stories were whipped up and widely believed. As is typical in situations of oral transmission, these things often tended to grow larger and more exaggerated as they passed along the grapevine. 'Wee see the common people for the most part when they give themselves to talking proceed from badd to worse and incounter every tyme more foolishly then other', as one Jacobean pamphleteer put it.³²

An example of the way in which oral rumours, apparently without any obvious written provenance, could originate, spread and seize people's minds, was circulating on the Welsh borders and in the West country in the summer of 1628.³³ The report that King Charles was dead seems to have arisen early in July from the Carmarthenshire countryside when an escaping robber succeeded in shaking off those in 'hott pursuite cominge after him' by crying that the king had met his end. Given perennial insecurities over such things, this tale was apparently believed and threw the authorities into panic. The news quickly spread to Llanelli and from there a remarkable chain of transmission was set in motion. About noon on Tuesday 8th, William ap Evan, keeper of the ferry over the river Loughor, was suddenly disturbed in his fishing by a great noise coming from the direction of Llanelli. He looked up to see 'a great number of people cominge towards him to the number ... of one hundred persones at the least, crying most fearefully'. They poured into the town of Loughor protesting news of the king's death. Panic was now such that many had convinced themselves that the Spaniards had also landed on the coast. Gathering more raisers of the alarm they set off towards Swansea.

Before long they had reached the town, by which time a further embellishment to the story had developed to the effect that the king had been poisoned by the duke of Buckingham. As we have seen, rumours that Buckingham was a poisoner had been in circulation since at least 1625 when speculation that he had disposed of James I in this way was the subject of common gossip, and it came to occasion discussion both in parliament and in print the following year.³⁴ In a panic situation, then, this well established suspicion appears to

³² P.R.O., SP14/126/1. On the forms and functions of rumour, see in particular, Gordon W. Allport and Leo J. Postman, *The psychology of rumour* (New York, 1947); Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised news: a sociological study of rumour* (New York, 1966); James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), esp. pp. 144-5. A classic case study is George Lefebvre, *The great fear of 1789: rural panic in revolutionary France*, trans. Joan White (London, 1973).

³³ The events described in this and the following paragraph are based upon P.R.O., SP16/110/6i, 16/110/13, 16/110/41, 16/111/2ii-ii, 16/114/23i.

³⁴ George Eglisham, *The forerunner of revenge* (Frankfurt, 1626, S.T.C. 7548). (I am grateful to Alastair Bellany for the reference to this pamphlet and for discussion of this issue.)

have been given a fresh impetus and a new focus. At Swansea, the portreeve Patrick Jones acted promptly upon the news, mustering the trained bands and sending word on to Neath where, by about three o'clock, it had been received by many of the county's chief inhabitants who were there gathered for the quarter sessions. Meanwhile Jones and one of the aldermen, Henry Vaughan, publicly announced the report in the market square at Swansea which was met 'with a generall lamentacion of the whole people, who gave out that they feared that the papists would rise up in armes and kill them in their sleep'. Among the crowd were two Cornish sailors, Nicholas Browne and Thomas Ematt, who also heard the subsequent gossip of the local tradeswomen who added authority to the news by saying that it had come by post from the Council of Wales. Browne and Ematt then put to sea, landing at Crantock in Cornwall on Thursday. The following day they had reached St Columb where they were telling of the king's death at the hands of Buckingham who, they now claimed, had been imprisoned for the crime. By the time the two sailors were arrested, much of the south west coast seems to have been on stand-by in readiness for a foreign invasion.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were always such fantastical tales afoot concerning the health of the sovereign. It was speculation bred of insecurity and nurtured in ignorance. During the earlier years of Elizabeth's reign, for example, many people were indicted for spreading the news that Edward VI was still alive and imprisoned in the tower of London, a false hope which was to endure for long afterwards, fuelled by the impostors who continued to turn up claiming to be the lost king. 'Amongst the vulgar sort... what histories, chronicles, or politique discourses are not copious, and plentiful in this kind?' asked John Harvey in 1588 with reference to these rumours.³⁵ Later in the queen's reign many prophecies circulated predicting her downfall and there were repeated reports as she grew older, particularly in the troubled 1590s, that she was dead.³⁶ In due course, the tales were to circulate that Charles I had murdered his father and then that he himself had been done away with by Buckingham.³⁷

In general, the fortunes and the conduct of royal persons and their ministers was fair game for gossip. Perhaps the best example of this is provided by the stories told and retold throughout Elizabethan England, which appear to have little or no written origin, claiming that the queen had borne various children by Robert Dudley, the earl of Leicester. Such speculation may have appealed

³⁵ John Harvey, *A discursive probleme concerning prophetes* (London, 1588), pp. 61–2; and for examples, see P.R.O., SP12/184/50, 12/184/70; P.R.O., ASSI35/20/5/36; ASSI35/21/7/3; ASSI35/21/7/24; ASSI35/28/2/36; ASSI35/29/1/33; ASSI35/36/2/39; *A.P.C.*, 1552–54, p. 363; *A.P.C.*, 1554–56, pp. 122, 221; *A.P.C.*, 1579–80, pp. 194, 214 371; *A.P.C.*, 1580–81, pp. 23–4, 29, 353–4. This phenomenon is discussed in Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England* (London, 1971), pp. 419–22.

³⁶ For examples of such prophecies, see P.R.O., SP12/172/7; SP12/192/50; SP12/194/57i; SP12/200/28; SP12/251/69; SP12/252/94i; SP12/276/111; P.R.O., ASSI35/14/6/21; ASSI35/25/1/37; ASSI35/26/7/25; ASSI35/37/9/41; ASSI35/42/7/27; and for rumours of the queen's death, see P.R.O., SP12/272/49i; P.R.O., ASSI35/22/1/9; ASSI35/38/7/3; ASSI35/38/7/5. ³⁷ See, for example, P.R.O., SP16/491/78; P.R.O., ASSI45/5/7/17.

both to opponents of the crown and its religion and to those supporters who hoped vainly for an heir to the throne. It was clearly widespread from the earliest years of the reign and, like so much rumour and news, it probably emanated from the capital originally. In December 1559, Thomas Holland, vicar of Little Burstead, took the story back into south Essex after ‘beinge at London’ where he had ‘met with one in Chepeside that was sometyme vicar of Stortford in Hertfordshire... who told hym that the quene’s majestie was with childe’. Not far away, the following June, a group of women were gossiping about the queen and Dudley, much as people speculate today about royal romances. Soon afterwards, one of their number, Anne Dowe of Brentwood, met Mr Cooke on his horse. “‘What newes mother Dowe?’” he asked, ‘and she sayd that she knew no other newes but that she said a woman told her that Dudley had given the quene a new petycote that cost twentie nobles, and the sayd Cooke sayd to [her], “Thynks thou that it was a petiecote? No, no, he gave her a chyld, I warrant thee”’.³⁸

Over the succeeding years these rumours continued to spread, growing larger and more elaborate. By January 1580, for example, Thomas Playfere, a labourer from Maldon in Essex, could be heard saying among his neighbours that Elizabeth did have lawful successors since she ‘had two children by my Lord Robert (meaning the earl of Leicester) and that he did see them when they were shipped at Rye in two of the best shippes the quene hathe’. The tale had grown even taller by the time it was told in May 1585 by a Surrey woman, Alice Austen, who claimed that ‘the queene is no mayd and she hath had three sunnes by the earle of Leicester, and that they shold have bene made earles’. By 1590 there was still more to tell: the queen “‘hath had alreadye as manye children as I’”, proclaimed Denise Deryck of Witham, Essex, in April. She was sure that ‘too of them were yet alyve, the one being a man childe and the other a mayden childe and furdur that the other[s] were burned. And beinge demanded by whome she had them, she said, “By my lord of Lycester who was father to them and wrapped them upp in the embers in the chymney which was in the chamber wher they were borne”’. Two months later the yarn had moved on to Coopersale in Epping, twenty-five miles away, where Robert Gardner, a husbandman, had picked it up in a form yet further embellished: there had been four offspring ‘whereof three of them were daughters and alyve and the fourthe a sonne that was burnte’. Robert Fowler, a blacksmith from Wisborough Green in Sussex, had got it into his head, and was heard to proclaim, early in 1600 ‘that the earle of Essex was the sonne of the queene of England and that the queenes majestie had an other sonne whom menn did suppose to be the brother of Mr [John] Walwyn, late vicar of Wisborough Greene’.³⁹

It would be easy to dismiss all these fabulous stories of a long dead prince

³⁸ P.R.O., SP12/12/51; P.R.O., SP12/13/2li.

³⁹ P.R.O., ASSI35/22/10/14; P.R.O., ASSI35/27/8/31; P.R.O., ASSI35/32/2/48; P.R.O., ASSI35/32/2/49; P.R.O., ASSI35/42/9/15; and for other examples, see P.R.O., SP12/148/34; P.R.O., SP12/269/22; P.R.O., SP14/4/2; P.R.O., SP16/118/35i; P.R.O., ASSI35/28/6/46.

returning to claim the throne, of kings and queens imprisoning or poisoning each other, or of the secret birth of hoards of royal bastards, as the deranged fantasies of a deluded few. But such reports occur in a sufficient number and variety of contexts to demand more serious consideration. They imply, on the part of a large number of people, a rather different and more elastic conception of what was possible in politics, let alone plausible, than is usually reckoned upon in historical discussions of political opinion. Popular perceptions of the monarchy and its activities savour of a world view fashioned by the traditions of chivalric legend and historical romance; a world of sleeping heroes, of devious deeds by wicked tyrants and of illicit love forbidden by circumstance. Rumours and news stories are often constructed from recognized narrative patterns, and to many, perhaps, the life of the court and its personnel was as remote and fantastic as the places and characters in their fictional tales of long ago and far away. As such, accounts of prodigious birth, cruel death and miraculous resurrection would all have been considered perfectly familiar and believable. The implications of this mentality are not without wider significance. It is often suggested, for example, that before the middle of the seventeenth century, and scarcely then, most English people could not have even countenanced or imagined committing regicide. The evidence presented here indicates that such an idea can hardly have struck them as inconceivable.

If some popular notions of political machinations could be wildly fanciful by the standards of more sophisticated observers, however, not all commonplace comment on the government and the affairs of the realm was quite so misguided. For, as we have seen, the news from London and elsewhere could be dispersed down through the ranks of provincial society very quickly by oral communication and rather more slowly, but perhaps more reliably, via manuscript and printed sources. People everywhere might be furnished with up-to-date information on events in the kingdom, therefore, and on this basis they were able to form quite knowledgeable opinions on important issues. This becomes especially evident from the later 1620s and the 1630s when the greater amount and quality of news in circulation begins to be reflected in the content of seditious conversations. It may be that, by the reign of Charles I, ordinary men and women were better informed than had been many of their predecessors. Some of their views evidence a rising level and subtlety of political consciousness which was probably a direct result both of these improved communication channels and of the constitutional debates of the day. There is, of course, a great need for caution when attempting to analyse cases of sedition for evidence of general opinion. Only statements and conversations considered to be subversive or dangerous attracted the attention of those in authority and came to be recorded via judicial processes. The outrageous and exceptional is thus often more accessible than the unobjectionable and typical. Despite this, however, it is possible to detect, amid the examples of speculation, fancy and prejudice, this increasingly informed level of discussion and with it a more measured degree of criticism.

There is evidence of this in a conversation of October 1626 which

demonstrates that, even then, the positions of ‘country’ and ‘court’ were clearly being articulated in the inns and ordinaries of London. On this occasion, Thomas Bridiman, from Berwick in Northumberland, had gone to visit his countrywoman Dorothy Manners and her husband Henry who were lodging at John Brangston’s tavern in Drury Lane. During supper the landlord’s wife happened to mention the troops who had mustered at Tuttle Fields two days before. This prompted Bridiman to predict ‘that there would bee shortly in London such a shew of souldiers as they had not seene in their age’ to put an end to the duke of Buckingham. For it was the case, he continued, ‘that now, the auncient men’s coucells are refused and justice had not lawfull proceeding and the papists encreased and grew bold, unto whom it is held the duke of Buckingham is a greate patron, and he added further that if the state stood as it doth it would not continue long’. When asked what would become of it, he answered, ‘“It may bee it shall bee a free state, for perhaps the Palatine and the Lady Elizabeth shall have it.”’ Turning to John Brangston, he asked him ‘whether he would be for the king or the country’. His host replied that ‘hee had bin asked that question before’ and, thinking about it, ‘said a while after, hee would bee for the king’. More discussion followed before Bridiman offered the balanced judgement ‘that it was a shame that one unworthy man should have all the cheife offices in the commonwealth, or to that purpose, and yet added that the duke of Buckingham was a gallant gentleman and of good qualities, but had done noe service abroad’.⁴⁰

It was just such opinions about corruption and office holding, popery and failures abroad which were circulating in ballads and songs. In this popular and accessible format, informed criticism helped to provide political education for the wider populace. During 1627, material of this kind was noted in the mouths of minstrels at Ware in Hertfordshire, at Staines and Windsor in Hampshire and publicly posted at Dunmow in Essex and Bartholomew Fair in London. Three fiddlers from Middlesex named Moseley, Markehall and Greene, ‘being poore people’, were convicted for singing several ‘libelous songs against the duke of Buckingham and the king and the privy council, but principally they were intended against the duke’. One of them was the famous ‘Clean Contrary Way’ while another was entitled ‘Take him Devil, Take him’. Small wonder that, in sentencing these ballad singers, Attorney General Heath could describe libels as ‘the epidemical disease of these days’. Even specifically topical and newsworthy ballads were apparently recycled long after they ceased to be current, continuing to discredit the king and his ministers. A very widely known song composed after the disastrous Ile de Rhe expedition, for example, cropped up again at the end of 1634 when William Eardly, an apprentice woollen-draper, was dining with a friend, Christopher Clough, in Fish Street, London. ‘Among other discourse’, Eardly ‘repeated certain verses which were made some 7 years before of the late duke of Buckingham, which verses the said Clough desired to have and asked [him]

⁴⁰ P.R.O., SP16/39/40-1.

whether they were new or noe, who answered he might have them and make them new if he pleased...'.⁴¹

The speed with which more up-to-date news might structure political discussion was revealed by the fact that, just two weeks after Charles I had dissolved parliament for the last time on 2 March 1629, the issue came up over a meal among a group of servants at Towcester in Northamptonshire. Joseph Booth asked the others “‘What news?’” and spoke himself ‘of the parliament and the breaking of it off’. There seems to have been general agreement among them that it was the queen who was to blame for his taking against it. Meanwhile, Stephen ap Evan was meeting William Jones on the highway outside Reilth in Shropshire and asking him “‘What was the newes at London?’”. Jones answered that ‘the parliament was dissolved and that some gents were committed, whereuppon the said Stephen replied that the king would lose the hearts of his subjects by reason of his charging them so deepe with loan mony and subsidies...’. Perhaps such conversations were inspired by the seditious papers which could be found pasted up at the Exchange or St. Paul’s cross accusing the king of acting unconstitutionally. One displayed at Paul’s in mid-May of 1629 began, ‘Oh king, or rather noe king, for thou hast lost the hearts of thy subjects, and therefore noe king, nor they any longer thy subjects, that relation now ceaseth, violated on thy part’.⁴²

By the 1630s this deriding of the king and of other great persons within the realm appears to have been a common feature of tavern discourse. Many seditious grumbings and libellous ballads were directed at the religion and policies of Archbishop Laud, for example.⁴³ Further outbursts were occasioned by particular issues, such as the attempt to raise ship money.⁴⁴ Other criticism was levelled at the monarch more specifically: his perceived willingness to be governed by favourites, his leanings towards popery, and his disregard for the constitution and the laws.⁴⁵ Some looked to the scriptures in order to provide

⁴¹ P.R.O., SP16/68/28, 16/70/10, 16/70/24, 16/70/45, and British Library, London. Lansdowne MS 620 (Reports of the Star-Chamber cases from pasch. 1 Car. 1 to hill. 3 Car. 1 inclusive), fos. 50–51; P.R.O., SP16/278/12. For the full text of this Ile de Rhe ballad, see P.R.O., SP16/85/84, and F. W. Fairholt, ed., *Poems and songs relating to George Villiers, duke of Buckingham* (Percy Society, xxix, London, 1850), pp. 19–24, and see the discussion in Cust, ‘News and politics in early seventeenth-century England’, pp. 67–9; Alastair Bellany, “‘Raylinge rymes and vaunting verse”: libellous politics in early Stuart England, 1603–1628”, in Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake, eds., *Culture and politics in early Stuart England* (London, 1994), pp. 285–310. On a cruder level, there must have been many with the modicum of invention displayed by Cornish gentleman, Charles Tregion, a prisoner in the Fleet at this time, who ‘used to sing a prophane songe, in the foote of which songe, in scandall and disgrace of the name of the duke of Buckingham, he would singe him by the name of the duke of Fuckingham’: P.R.O., SP16/89/69.

⁴² P.R.O., SP16/140/44; P.R.O., SP16/147/27; P.R.O., SP16/142/92–3.

⁴³ P.R.O., SP16/247/59; SP16/248/93; SP16/250/58–9; SP16/254/50; SP16/254/52; SP16/260/48; SP16/260/79; SP16/267/89i; SP16/327/140; SP16/361/117; SP16/417/97i–iii; SP16/421/21; SP16/422/113; SP16/423/83; SP16/429/30; SP16/453/96–7; SP16/456/36; SP16/458/110; SP16/461/46; SP16/469/95; SP16/487/48; SP16/506/34–5.

⁴⁴ P.R.O., SP16/294/68; SP16/318/76i–iv; SP16/361/64i; SP16/370/1; SP16/387/64; SP16/399/27; SP16/399/46; SP16/458/110.

⁴⁵ P.R.O., SP16/171/37i; SP16/197/35; SP16/198/37; SP16/211/65; SP16/220/30; SP16/222/48; SP16/231/56i; SP16/248/60; SP16/251/31; SP16/258/50i; SP16/262/16; SP16/272/

the language and the justifications in which to couch their opposition. Thus, in March 1636 a Northamptonshire petty chapman, John Lewes, was arrested at Buxton Latimer for having opined on his travels that ‘the kinge was noe better then the begger (as he heard preachers say out of the byble, or as it was written in his byble) except he discharges his callinge as he ought. Nay he was worse than a begger and his case shalbe more miserable.’ Three years later, a London carpenter, George Goodwin, was down at Rye in Sussex when he found himself before the mayor for saying in public that ‘King James, neglecting to do justice, lost his right to the kingdom and King Charles going on in the same courses is an usurper and saith that if he had his right he should enjoy the kingdom. His ground for saying this is that in Ecclesiastes, that better is poore and a wise child then an old and foolish king.’⁴⁶

Such popular dissent was not merely intemperate invective but amounted to more thoughtful opposition, while even the articulation of specific grievances might develop into quite subtle discussion of the wider constitutional issues. One debate among the neighbours at Middleton in Westmorland during April 1636, in which the possibility of Charles I becoming a Catholic was clearly in everyone’s mind, saw the conversation turn to the more abstract principle of whether a people ‘might lawfully take armes against their prince in matters of conscience or religion’. Another airing of the problems of the day at an inn in Kingsthorpe, Northamptonshire, in the summer of 1638, found the chief constable William Walker ‘prating and grumbling much against the ship monie’ as ‘an intolerable exaction, burden and oppression layed upon the land’. He predicted that ‘the ship monie here in England woulde cause the like stirres that were now in Scotland before it were longe’ and opined that ‘the kinge was under a law as much as anie subiect and that he could doe nothinge of himself without his subiects’. When it was put to him that the lawfulness of the tax had been determined by the judges themselves, ‘he confest indeede that some judges had determined it to be law butt the best and most honest had not’. In June 1642, John Troutbeck fell into discourse with a gentleman, Francis Gifford, at an alehouse in Knaresbrough, North Riding, during which he asserted ‘that he could live as well without a king as with a king’. When Gifford asked him ‘what did tye the king to observe and keepe the lawes?’ Troutbeck answered, ‘“By his oath”’. But, continued Gifford, ‘howe, if the king did not keepe the lawes and his oath, how stood the case then?’ to which Troutbeck replied that ‘he might be deposed for ought he knew’.⁴⁷

18–19; SP16/290/18i; SP16/367/73; SP16/387/59; SP16/391/85; SP16/426/41; SP16/454/42; SP16/458/110. See also J. C. Jeaffreson, ed., *Middlesex county records* (4 vols., Middlesex County Record Society, London, 1886–92), III, 74, 81.

⁴⁶ P.R.O., SP16/317/16; H.M.C., *13th report, appendix, part IV* (London, 1892), p. 208. On the influence of the bible in structuring political opinion, see Christopher Hill, *The English bible and the seventeenth-century revolution* (London, 1993), esp. chs. 1–2.

⁴⁷ P.R.O., SP16/409/102; P.R.O., SP16/395/40; James Raine, ed., *Depositions from the castle of York relating to offences committed in the northern circuit in the seventeenth century* (Surtees Society, XL, Durham, 1861), pp. 4–5.

IV

It seems clear, then, that people at the lowest levels of provincial society in Elizabethan and early Stuart England were by no means cut off from the flow of information and news. It emanated largely from London and circulated, via provincial towns and their social centres, into the villages and communities of the countryside. The vehicle for this communication was principally the oral exchange born of interpersonal contact. Increasingly, however, the development of written and printed sources of news, which was such a feature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, began to nourish traditional means of verbal dissemination.

As a result of this, it is unwise for historians to overlook those excluded from the formal political nation when assessing the extent and impact of political debate at this time. To be sure, much of what passed for news was no more than wildly false rumour and much of what constituted discussion of current affairs was little better than the vitriol of partisans, but this could be no less the case at higher social levels. Increasingly, moreover, it is also possible to identify amid the innaccurate and intemperate a popular newsmongering and debate of a more well informed and considered kind. Ordinary men and women were not unaware of the course of political events and could express opinions based upon understanding. The authorities did their best to try to suppress what they saw as 'lavish and licentious speech of matters of state' on the part of 'the vulgar' but they were never entirely successful in doing so. It is arguable that the apparently mounting tide of popular criticism directed at royal personnel and policies during these years contributed to the general climate of discontent which made possible the breakdown of order in the 1640s. It is more certain that most people would have had at least a general knowledge of the issues when it came to taking sides in conflict.