

John Tutchin's *Observer*, comment serials and the "rage of party" in Britain, 1678-c.1730

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Abstract. The prominence of print in the "rage of party" of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Britain is well known, but scholars have paid insufficient attention to the press phenomenon that provided the most persistent and undiluted partisan voices of their day, the comment serial. Comment serials – regular printed publications designed specifically to present topical analysis, opinion and advice – could be fashioned into more powerful partisan weapons for combat in "paper wars" than other forms of topical print, especially pamphlets and newspapers, due to their regularity and flexibility. Although many publications have been individually recognised as comment serials, such as Roger L'Estrange's *Observer* (1681-87), Daniel Defoe's *Review* (1704-13) and Jonathan Swift and others' *Examiner* (1710-14), their development as a distinct phenomenon has not been properly understood. They first appeared during the Succession Crisis (1678-82) and proliferated especially under Queen Anne (1702-14). Through their widespread consumption, both direct and indirect, they shaped partisan culture in various ways, including by reinforcing and galvanising partisan identities, by facilitating the development of partisan "reading communities", and by manifesting and representing party divisions in public. This article focuses on John Tutchin's *Observer* (1702-12) as a case study of a major comment serial.

"[I]f... I should be so Fortunate as to meet you in any Publick Place, Coffee-House, or Tavern, I would Divert my self in breaking your Head".¹ So wrote one correspondent to John Tutchin in 1703, and

¹ *Observer*, 2.9. Serials are cited with volume and issue number, as "v.i". Quotations preserve italics, except where roman and italic are inverted, when they are quoted in non-inverted form. Footnote references to "*Observer*" refer to Tutchin's *Observer* unless indicated.

such threats of personal violence were not uncommon.² Even the Duke of Marlborough concurred with the sentiment, writing that “I believe Mr. T[utchin] will be soundly drubbed; I hope every honest Englishman would approve... [I wish] I had some friend that would concern himself to get [Tutchin] well beaten”.³ Tutchin refused to be intimidated – “if Threats would have Kill’d a Man, I had been as Dead as a Herring many Years ago” – but the risk was very real, and he suffered an apparent assassination attempt in February 1707.⁴ “As I was sitting above Stairs at a Publick House,” he recounted, “there came in upon me six Ruffians, and all fell upon me with their Sticks and Canes: I had nothing to defend my self, but my Hands... and had not the Man of the House got out of his Bed to my Assistance, they might have accomplish’d their Design”.⁵ When he died a few months later, some attributed this to the earlier attack. “It grieves me to the Heart,” one friend wrote, “that after all his good Services to his Country, he should have been murder’d at last”.⁶

Whether or not his death was actually connected to these beatings,⁷ it is clear is that he provoked extreme hatred in some quarters. John Tutchin was a well-known and controversial figure in early eighteenth century Britain. His fame – or notoriety – derived from his authorship of a twice-weekly printed sheet of “observations”, through which he had established himself as a prominent public commentator on current affairs. For over a decade, the *Observer* (1702-12) presented opinion and analysis about the constitution, religion, foreign affairs and more to the British reading public. It was controversial partly because it was perceived as illegitimately “meddling with state affairs” that were properly the preserve of the government alone.⁸ However, the main reason for hostility to the *Observer* was its role as a vehicle for the regular dissemination of a partisan, Whig worldview.

² *Observer*, 2.35, 3.57, 3.92, 6.5.

³ HMC, *The manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Portland* (London, 1891-1931), vol. 4, p. 338.

⁴ *Observer*, 2.9.

⁵ *Observer*, 5.96.

⁶ *Observer*, 6.60.

⁷ L.S. Horsley, ‘The trial of John Tutchin, author of the *Observer*’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 3 (1973), pp. 139-40.

⁸ Tutchin was defensive about this, e.g. *Observer*, 1.21, 1.34, 4.25.

During the “rage of party” that divided British politics, press and society in later Stuart Britain, this was guaranteed to stoke anger in Tutchin’s Tory opponents.

As a serial publication designed to convey comment on current affairs, the *Observer* was part of a wider trend in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century press. “Comment serials”, as I call them here, first emerged during the Succession Crisis or Exclusion Crisis (1678-82), and were firmly established as a distinct form of publication by Queen Anne’s reign (1702-14). They differentiated themselves from newspapers, in particular, by describing themselves using keywords that denoted comment rather than news, for instance “observations”, “reflections” and “remarks”, and by adopting discursive genres such as the dialogue and the essay. Their main function was to project partisan arguments to the public more directly and persistently than was possible in newspapers or pamphlets, and they were among the most prominent public partisan voices of their day. Some comment serials are reasonably well known, for instance Roger L’Estrange’s *Observer* (1681-87), Daniel Defoe’s *Review* (1704-13) and Jonathan Swift and others’ *Examiner* (1710-14). Others are more obscure, including Tutchin’s *Observer*.

However, comment serials have not been examined as a collective phenomenon. The “explosion” of topical print in the seventeenth century has been widely discussed, through various peaks and troughs – significant but temporary proliferation during the 1640s civil wars and the Succession Crisis, then permanent growth from the 1690s onwards – that correlated with shifts in government press policy (especially collapses of licensing laws in 1641, 1679 and 1695) and the intensity of partisan activity. Scholars have considered print’s effects on political culture, for instance in promoting public political engagement and partisan alignment.⁹ Particular attention has been paid

⁹ See especially G.S. De Krey, *A fractured society: the politics of London in the first age of party, 1688-1715* (Oxford, 1985); T. Harris, *London crowds in the reign of Charles II: propaganda and politics from the Restoration until the exclusion crisis* (Cambridge, 1987); J. Peacey, *Print and public politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013).

to the “pamphlet”, the main form of topical print throughout the early modern period. Pamphlets came in many varieties, but typically were short, cheap publications designed for maximum impact through their speed of appearance, style and/or content.¹⁰ Scholars have also examined the “newspaper” – another heterogeneous category rather than a single genre, encompassing various kinds of serial publication (usually weekly or sub-weekly) designed to convey reports of recent events. Newspapers were first printed in Britain in the 1620s, exploded in the 1640s, and had similar chronological peaks and troughs to the wider print landscape thereafter. Serial publication was a major innovation, by allowing multiple separate publications to be presented as instalments of the same overarching publication, hence giving serials particular traction among readers. As a result, some scholars have argued for the particular contribution of newspaper consumption to the politicisation of the reading public.¹¹

Compared with pamphlets and newspapers, comment serials have received limited attention, not least because there is no agreement on terminology, or even the utility of the concept itself. In 1934, Theodore Newton called for a study of the “journal of political controversy” to accompany work on the “newspaper” and “literary periodical”, but this remains unfulfilled.¹² Some scholars have referenced something like comment serials in particular contexts, using terms such as “journals of opinion” and “periodicals of reflection”, but usually only when describing individual serials such as Defoe’s *Review*,¹³ or in analyses of sub-periods, as has been separately argued for the Succession

¹⁰ J. Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering in early modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹¹ J. Raymond, *The invention of the newspaper: English newsbooks, 1641-1649* (Oxford, 1996); C.J. Sommerville, *The news revolution in England: cultural dynamics of daily information* (New York and Oxford, 1996); J. Raymond, 'The newspaper, public opinion, and the public sphere in the seventeenth century', in his *News, newspapers, and society in early modern Britain* (London, 1999), pp. 109-40; H. Barker, *Newspapers, politics and English society, 1695-1855* (Harlow: Longman, 2000); U. Heyd, *Reading newspapers: press and public in eighteenth-century Britain and America* (Oxford, 2012).

¹² T.F.M. Newton, 'The mask of Heraclitus: a problem in Restoration journalism', *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, XVI (Cambridge, MS, 1934), p. 145.

¹³ E.g. J.A. Downie, 'Stating facts right about Defoe's *Review*', in J.A. Downie and T.N. Corns, eds, *Telling people what to think: early eighteenth-century periodicals from The Review to The Rambler* (London, 1993), p. 19.

Crisis, William III's reign and Anne's reign.¹⁴ There has been reluctance to connect these instances into a broader press phenomenon evolving over several decades. Indeed, some scholars have denied the idea altogether, treating comment-heavy serials simply as forms of newspaper.¹⁵ The most commonly-used label, "journal of opinion", is problematic, because in contemporary usage "journal" was associated with miscellanies or newspapers;¹⁶ "comment serials" is suggested here as a preferable term.¹⁷ Another difficulty is how to relate comment serials to literary scholarship on the emergence of the "periodical essay" and "literary periodical" in the early eighteenth century, typically exemplified by Addison and Steele's *Tatler* (1709-11) and *Spectator* (1711-12, 1714), which have overshadowed their more overtly political predecessors and contemporaries, including Tutchin's *Observer*.¹⁸

As a result, the place of comment serials in the "rage of party" is imperfectly understood. Partisanship was a defining feature of early modern British political culture, as people identified with different political groupings, usually defined by constitutional or religious opinions, and expressed these through assembling, writing, reading, voting, petitioning, socialising, worshipping and sometimes fighting. Partisanship was represented by a panoply of labels, many developed by opponents – papists, puritans, Cavaliers, Roundheads, Whigs, Tories – and party divisions frequently

¹⁴ J. Sutherland, *The Restoration newspaper and its development* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 18; R.B. Walker, 'The newspaper press in the reign of William III', *Historical Journal*, 17.4 (1974), pp. 691-709; S. Sherman, 'Literature, 1701-1713', in D. Womersley, ed., *A companion to literature from Milton to Blake* (Oxford, 2000), p. 431.

¹⁵ E.g. J. Black, *The English press in the eighteenth century* (London and Sydney, 1987), p. xv; Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering*, p. 351; P. Hinds, 'The horrid popish plot': Roger L'Estrange and the circulation of political discourse in late seventeenth-century London (Oxford, 2010), p. 28.

¹⁶ E.g. *Gentleman's Journal* and *Mist's Weekly Journal* respectively.

¹⁷ "Comment" is preferred to "opinion" as being more neutral and expansive, encompassing both impartial and partial content. "Serial" surpasses "periodical" as an overarching term for multi-installment publications because it encompasses titles published irregularly as well as regularly, and because "periodical" is sometimes used specifically for literary or moral serials *contra* newspapers.

¹⁸ Key older works include W. Graham, *English literary periodicals* (New York, 1930) and R.P. Bond, *Studies in the early English periodical* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1957). Recent studies include I. Italia, *The rise of literary journalism in the eighteenth century* (London and New York, 2005); R. DeMaria, 'The eighteenth-century periodical essay', in J. Richetti, ed., *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 527-48; R. Squibbs, *Urban enlightenment and the eighteenth-century periodical essay: transatlantic retrospects* (London, 2014).

shifted, realigned, and altered in intensity. They were at their strongest during the civil wars, and then again in the “rage of party” of c.1680-1720, when the labels “Whig” and “Tory” became prominent. Broadly speaking, Whigs believed in popular sovereignty through Parliament and rights for nonconformist Protestants (“Dissenters”), while Tories believed in a strong Crown and Church. One major battleground of party conflict was the press – including comment serials.

The aim of this article is to identify the comment serial phenomenon and locate it in partisan culture. This being a vast subject, Tutchin’s *Observer* is taken as the primary case study. It is in three parts. The first examines how the *Observer* was conceived as a comment serial, and maps the contours of comment serial publication across the period 1678-c.1730. The second explores the chief function of comment serials – to act as public partisan weapons – by analysing how the *Observer* was fashioned to fire regular Whig “paper bullets” into the public sphere. The third considers how comment serials reverberated around partisan culture, by examining patterns in the *Observer*’s consumption. The *Observer* is a good case study because its contemporary importance contrasts with historiographical neglect.¹⁹ In this “golden age of periodical journalism”, it is overshadowed by more famous serials of canonical authors, especially Defoe’s *Review*, Swift’s *Examiner*, and Addison and Steele’s *Tatler* and *Spectator* – even though the *Observer* predated all four. The historiographical prominence of these serials is the *Observer*’s curse, as it is frequently mentioned but rarely analysed, being regarded as inferior in style and argument.²⁰

The first *Observer* appeared on 1 April 1702, shortly after Anne’s accession. After ten years and 1,065 issues, the final *Observer* was published on 30 July 1712. It initially appeared weekly, but from May 1702 was twice-weekly, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Physically, the *Observer*

¹⁹ Aspects are discussed in Horsley, ‘Trial’; idem, ‘Rogues or honest gentlemen: the public characters of Queen Anne journalists’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 18:2 (1976), pp. 198-228; J.P. Kenyon, *Revolution principles: the politics of party, 1689-1720* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 105-11.

²⁰ J. McVeagh, ed., *Defoe’s Review* (London, 2003-11), vol. 1, pp. xiv-xv is typical.

resembled most contemporary serials – a half-sheet folio, with two columns on each side. For most of its life, it was a dialogue between characters named “Observer” and “Countryman”, who had conversations about the news. For the first five years, it was written by John Tutchin (1663/4-1707), a poet and pamphleteer.²¹ Tutchin was a Whig, and specifically an “old” Whig, an oppositional Whig of 1680s mould who rejected the “modern” Whigs who entered government in the 1690s. Besides the *Observer*, Tutchin is primarily remembered today for *The Foreigners*, a xenophobic poem that was answered by Defoe’s *True-Born Englishman*, and for two trials: one in 1685 for participating in the Monmouth Rebellion (for which he was convicted and later pardoned), and the other in 1704 for seditious libel in the *Observer* (for which he was convicted but later escaped on a legal technicality). After Tutchin’s death in 1707, the *Observer* was authored by another Whig, George Ridpath, the editor of the *Flying Post* newspaper. However, this article focuses on Tutchin’s period of authorship.

I.

Tutchin’s *Observer* was a comment serial, in that its core function was providing comment on the news rather than the news itself. When the *Observer* was launched in April 1702, this was unique among British serials. Most were newspapers of one kind or another, including the twice-weekly, government-sponsored *London Gazette*, several thrice-weekly newspapers – the *Post Man*, *Post Boy*, *Flying Post*, *English Post* and *London Post* – and the first successful daily paper, the *Daily Courant*. These newspapers all adopted well-established formal conventions. Their fundamental textual unit was the news paragraph, a discrete block of reporting that was disconnected from surrounding paragraphs.²² One or more news paragraphs might be headed by the place and date from which the

²¹ J.A. Downie’s *ODNB* biography is useful. Horsley, ‘Trial’, discusses Tutchin’s legal troubles.

²² W. Slauter, ‘The paragraph as information technology: how news traveled in the eighteenth century Atlantic world’, *Annales HSS*, 67:2 (2012), pp. 253-78.

report had come. Earlier and later varieties of newspaper had contained editorial comment or partisan news presentation, but these were largely lacking from newspapers in 1702. Indeed, the *Daily Courant* specifically disavowed comment, the editor promising that he would not “take upon him to give any Comments or Conjectures of his own, but will relate only Matter of Fact; supposing other People to have Sense enough to make Reflections for themselves”.²³

The *Observer* was different. Its *raison d'être* was opinion, advice or analysis – comment – rather than news. The *Observer* was packed with discussion of the constitution, the press, domestic politics and foreign affairs. This was most clearly demonstrated in the content summaries placed at the head of each issue. For instance:

“Reflections on the Poem of *Sorrel*. A Vindication of King *William*. On the Poem, call'd *The English Muse*. The Ingratitude of King *William's* Favourites. On the Necessity and Advantage of Privateers to the *English*, in case of a War. The difference betwixt the *English* and *French* Nations, in Respect of Privateers.”²⁴

This issue contains a typically miscellaneous variety of comment: discussions of a Jacobite poem, William III's political management, and war strategy against France. The language of “reflections” and “vindication” indicates that this was comment rather than news. This is not to say that the *Observer* contained *no* news, but its essence was discussions rather than reports.

A more objective indicator that the *Observer* was designed as a comment serial is its choice of genre – initially a free prose style (“essay” is perhaps too strong), and then dialogue. In both cases, the adoption of a discursive genre rather than newspaper forms enabled and indeed required

²³ *Daily Courant*, 1.

²⁴ *Observer*, 1.5.

Tutchin to focus the *Observer* on comment, although Tutchin preferred dialogue. He lamented that his initial prose style had rendered his arguments “not so clear as he could have wished”, as “the *Scruples* and *Reasons* on the other Side, were not by this Method so plainly Remov’d or Answer’d”.²⁵ Dialogue, in contrast, enabled him to present the alternative arguments through the questioning of the “Countryman”, an honest but ignorant Englishman, and then provide the correct view in the voice of the “Observer”, a learned patriot who represented Tutchin himself. This drew on a long heritage of dialogue as a genre of political comment, pre-dating the civil wars.²⁶

The *Observer*’s title also identified it as a comment serial. “Observer” means “one who makes observations”, and “observations” had functioned as a keyword for comment in topical print since at least the 1640s, sometimes with particular connotations such as answering opponents, analysing news items, and providing topical opinions. “Observations” and “Observer” were also specifically juxtaposed with keywords for news to express the idea of “comment on news”, for instance in the serials *Observations upon the Most Remarkable Occurrences in our Weekly News, Pegasus* (which contained sections entitled “News” and “Observer”), and *The New State of Europe, both as to Publick Transactions and Learning. With Impartial Observations Thereupon*.²⁷ In the *Observer*, Tutchin deployed the language of “observations” to describe his serial, declaring that “My Business is to make Observations, and to draw Conclusions from occurring Circumstances”, and looking forward to a time when “we shall be so Happy in our Publick Affairs, that there will be no need of Observations”.²⁸ Further, by taking “Observer” as his title, Tutchin unambiguously centred his serial on comment. Indeed, the title *personified* comment, and reinforced this further with Tutchin’s appearance as the dialogue character “Observer”. John Tutchin, a.k.a. “Mr Observer” or “the Observer”, thus effectively presented himself as “Mr Commentator” or “*the* commentator”.

²⁵ *Observer*, 1.19.

²⁶ A recent discussion is J. Halford, “‘Of Dialogue, that Great and Powerful Art’: A study of the dialogue genre in seventeenth century England” (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2016).

²⁷ In 1693, 1696 and 1701 respectively.

²⁸ *Observer*, 3.41, 3.98.

Tutchin's *Observer* was a comment serial, not a newspaper. In this, it was not alone. It was not the first comment serial – not even the first serial “Observer” – and had many rivals. The rest of this section will outline the main contours of the wider comment serial phenomenon. As already indicated, the first wave of comment serials appeared during the Succession Crisis of 1678-82. However, they had important antecedents during the civil wars, and these should briefly be discussed first.²⁹ Many civil war serials had a similar function to later comment serials, being designed as regular partisan weapons for royalists or parliamentarians. However, describing them as “comment serials” would be misleading. With a few short-lived exceptions,³⁰ most civil war serials were conceived as news publications,³¹ and expressed their partisanship primarily through news selection and presentation, sometimes with interleaved editorial comment. Some, especially certain late 1640s “Mercuries” such as *Mercurius Melancholicus* (1647-49), *Mercurius Bellicus* (1647-48) and *Mercurius Elencticus* (1647-49), could be *dominated* by comment, but they continued to adopt the form of news publications, describing themselves as organs of “news” or “intelligence”, so are best interpreted as the comment-heavy end of a spectrum rather than as a distinct form.³²

In contrast, serials specifically devoted to comment were a tangible phenomenon in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, different from the period's newspapers. At its core were serials that adopted the dialogue or essay genres, which were constructed as comment serials through both actively taking up these discursive genres and specifically rejecting newspaper forms.

²⁹ For civil war serials, see J. Frank, *The beginnings of the English newspaper, 1620-1660* (Cambridge, MS, 1961); Raymond, *Invention of the newspaper*; J. McElligott, *Royalism, print and censorship in revolutionary England* (Woodbridge, 2007).

³⁰ A few serials that answered other serials (e.g. *Britanicus Vapulans*, *Anti-Aulicus*), and a few innovative serials of 1654 (John Streater's *Observations* and *Politick Commentary*, Marchamont Nedham's *Observer*).

³¹ Usually known as “newsbooks” because they were quarto pamphlets, unlike later folio half-sheet “newspapers”.

³² J. Raymond, *Making the news: an anthology of the newsbooks of Revolutionary England, 1641-1660* (Moreton-in-Marsh, 1993), p. 19; N. Smith, *Literature and revolution in England, 1640-1660* (New Haven and London, 1994), p. 58.

Although they did not have a consistent contemporary label, some observers acknowledged their distinctness from newspapers, especially during their apogee under Anne. In 1708, Charles Leslie described Tutchin's *Observer* and Defoe's *Review* as the Whigs' "weekly penny Papers, which go through the Nation like *News-Papers*".³³ A 1707 book noted that people read not only "printed News" in coffeehouses, but "3 Papers besides, relating to the Government", the *Review*, *Observer* and Leslie's Tory *Rehearsal*.³⁴ Roger L'Estrange denied that his, earlier, *Observer* was a newspaper, as did Defoe the *Review*.³⁵ These serials also indicated comment in their titles, for instance "Observations on Transactions at Home" in the *Review*, "Reflections on the present State of Affairs" in *Mercurius Politicus* (1705) and "Remarks upon Papers and Occurrences" in the *Examiner*. Admittedly, comment serials were not universally distinguished by contemporaries: they were often described simply as "pamphlets", "libels", "papers" or even "newspapers". Even in formal terms, comment serials were not a watertight category, as they did not form a single genre, they had a partisan discursive style that was shared with many pamphlets and newspapers, and they overlapped with comment sections in newspapers.³⁶ But this does not negate the overall phenomenon.

Why did comment serials appear during the rage of party, but not the civil wars? In both cases, the impulse for regular, public partisan weapons was strong, and there was a conducive regulatory environment, not least through the active licensing of political print (in royalist Oxford and parliamentarian/Commonwealth London) or the absence of licensing (in 1679-85 and after 1695).³⁷ Part of the answer may simply be that the *idea* of serials explicitly devoted to comment had not yet been conceived in the 1640s, as serial publication was indelibly bound to news, having originally

³³ *Rehearsal*, vol. 1, preface.

³⁴ *The Present State of Great Britain* (1707), vol. 1, p. 137.

³⁵ L'Estrange, *Observer*, 1.325; *Review*, 5.1.

³⁶ E.g. the *London Post* and *Flying Post* had occasional comment sections in Anne's reign.

³⁷ For active licensing, see J. Peacey, *Politicians and pamphleteers: propaganda during the English civil wars and interregnum* (Aldershot, 2004), ch. 4.

been developed as a mechanism for capturing the rolling nature of news. Instead, comment was generally published in one-off pamphlets, or within or alongside news in news serials. The immediate reasons for comment serials emerging in the Succession Crisis are unclear, but it may be significant that contemporary news serials followed more restrictive formal conventions (of series of news paragraphs headed by a place and date) than their civil war precursors, which limited the possibilities for comment within news serials and thus encouraged a need for dedicated comment serials as organs of regular comment. Regardless, the speed with which comment serials then spread indicates that the political and market conditions for them to succeed were already ripe. Their subsequent proliferation after 1700 was undoubtedly connected with the most intense phase of public partisan warfare under Anne, when partisanship was so chronic that fashioning continuous partisan weapons had become essential.³⁸

Using genre, keywords and content, it is possible to outline the scope of comment serials with reasonable precision. They emerged in the 1680s, had their heyday in the 1700s and 1710s, and declined in the 1730s. Between 1678 and 1740, there were around sixty comment serials with thirty issues or more – including twenty-one with 100 or more issues, and five with 500 or more – in addition to hundreds with shorter runs.³⁹ Most were dialogues or essays, broadly shifting from the former to the latter by c.1710. Most were directly political and partisan, but these figures include serials of the *Spectator* variety that may be considered *moral* comment serials (of which more shortly).

³⁸ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this observation.

³⁹ 500+ issues: L'Estrange's *Observer* (1681-87, 931 issues), Tutchin's *Observer* (1702-12, 1,065 issues), *Review* (1704-13, c.1,346 issues), *Spectator* (1711-12, 1714, 635 issues), *Hyp Doctor* (1730-41, 534 issues). 100-499 issues: *Weekly Pacquet* (1678-83), *Mercurius Reformatus* (1689-94?), *Rehearsal* (1704-09), *Tatler* (1709-11), *Female Tatler* (1709-10), *Examiner* (1710-14), *Guardian* (1713), *Mercator* (1713-14), *British Merchant* (1713-14), *High-German Doctor* (1714-15), *Patriot* (1714-15), *Free-Thinker* (1718-21), *Pasquin* (1722-24), *Plain Dealer* (1724-25), *Free Briton* (1729-35), *Prompter* (1734-36).

The first wave emerged during the Succession Crisis, the first major flashpoint of party tensions since the Restoration, and the moment the labels “Whig” and “Tory” entered national politics. Partisan pamphlets and newspapers proliferated at this time, and the invention of comment serials represented an attempt to produce a still more powerful print weapon in the context of extreme partisan pressure. The most important moment was the swift development of the dialogue serial in early 1681. The Tory *Heraclitus Ridens* (1681-82), Roger L’Estrange’s *Tory Observer* (1681-87), and the “Popish Courant” section of Henry Care’s *Whig Weekly Pacquet* (1678-83) were established as major dialogue serials between February and April 1681, during the most acute phase of the crisis before and after the Third Exclusion Parliament, accompanied by other minor titles the same year.⁴⁰ L’Estrange’s *Observer* was a direct ancestor of Tutchin’s: Tutchin referred to L’Estrange as “My famous Predecessor” and “The first *Observer*”, despite being of the opposite partisan persuasion.⁴¹ The *Weekly Pacquet* was an ambiguous case. At its foundation, it was not really a comment serial, as it initially comprised an essay about Catholic history or theology and a light-hearted appendix, the “Popish Courant”, a satirical anti-Catholic newspaper.⁴² However, it dovetailed with the 1681 comment serials when the “Popish Courant” switched to dialogue.⁴³ There is some evidence that *Heraclitus Ridens* and L’Estrange’s *Observer* were officially commissioned, although they probably had an arms-length relationship with the regime.⁴⁴ The Whig comment serials derived from a network of Whig publishers, whose possible connections to politicians such as the Earl of Shaftesbury are uncertain.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ For *Heraclitus Ridens*, see Newton, ‘Mask’. The minor 1681 dialogues are *Democritus Ridens*, *Democritus Flens*, *Observer Observ’d* and *A New Dialogue Between Some Body and No Body*. There were some non-dialogue comment serials in 1681 too, e.g. *Weekly Discoverer Strip’d Naked* (prose), *Popish Mass Display’d* (verse).

⁴¹ *Observer*, 1.69, 4.16. For L’Estrange’s *Observer*, see M. Goldie, ‘Roger L’Estrange’s *Observer* and the exorcism of the plot’, in A. Dunan-Page and B. Lynch, eds, *Roger L’Estrange and the making of Restoration culture* (Aldershot, 2008), pp. 67-88.

⁴² For the *Weekly Pacquet*, see L.G. Schwoerer, *The ingenious Mr. Henry Care, Restoration publicist* (Baltimore and London, 2001), ch. 3.

⁴³ The “Popish Courant” was not consistently a dialogue after April 1681.

⁴⁴ Sutherland, *Restoration newspaper*, p. 18; Goldie, ‘Roger L’Estrange’s *Observer*’, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁵ Langley Curtis published the *Weekly Pacquet*, Benjamin Harris the *Weekly Discoverer Strip’d Naked*, and Francis Smith junior *Democritus Ridens*. For these Whig publishers, see T.J. Crist, ‘Francis Smith and the opposition press in England, 1660-1688’ (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1977); S. Randall, ‘Newspapers

Between 1683, when the government regained control over the press, and 1702, there were only two major comment serials, both pro-government: L'Estrange's *Observer*, continuing until 1687, and James Welwood's *Mercurius Reformatus, or the New Observer* (1689-94?), a Whig defence of William III's regime after the Glorious Revolution. The *New Observer*, which provided "Reflexions upon The most Remarkable Events... in *Europe*, and more particularly in *England*", was presented as a successor to L'Estrange's *Observer*, although it was an essay rather than a dialogue.⁴⁶ The final lapse of pre-publication press controls in 1695 – a totemic date in press history – did not provoke a new wave of comment serials as it did newspapers,⁴⁷ perhaps because of the less distinct party polarisation of the late 1690s, when a Court-Country divide competed with a Whig-Tory one.

Tutchin then founded his *Observer* – the third and final major "Observer" – in 1702.⁴⁸ This gave rise to a second wave of comment serials, accompanying the most intense phase of the rage of party, when Whig-Tory divisions strongly reasserted themselves. On both sides, there were near-continuous runs of comment serials. On the Tory side, the most prominent comment serials were the *Poetical Observer* (1702-03), *Heraclitus Ridens* (1703-04), the *Rehearsal* (1704-09), *Mercurius Politicus* (1705), the *Moderator* (1710), the *Examiner* (1710-14), the *Plain Dealer* (1712), the *Mercator* (1713-14), the *Monitor* (1714), and another *Examiner* (1714-16). On the Whig side, there were the *Observer* (1702-12), the *Review* (1704-13),⁴⁹ the *Medley* (1710-12), the *British Merchant* (1713-14), the *Britain* (1713), the *Englishman* (1713-14), the *Patriot* (1714-15), the *High-German Doctor* (1714-15), another *Englishman* (1715) and the *Free-Holder* (1715-16). The three most long-

and their publishers during the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis', in J. Hinks and C. Armstrong, eds, *Book trade connections from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries* (London, 2008), pp. 45-70.

⁴⁶ *Mercurius Reformatus*, vol. 1, title-page. For *Mercurius Reformatus*, see E.L. Furdell, *James Welwood: physician to the Glorious Revolution* (Conshohocken, PA, 1998), ch. 4.

⁴⁷ Three major newspapers were founded in 1695, the *Flying Post*, *Post Boy* and *Post Man*, which all lasted into the 1730s.

⁴⁸ Overall, there were over twenty "Observer" comment serials in 1681-1725, including minor titles.

⁴⁹ The *Review* was not consistently Whig, beginning and ending its life as more moderate.

lasting of these, besides the *Observer*, were the *Review*, the *Rehearsal* and the *Examiner*. The *Review* was initially modelled on Care's *Weekly Pacquet*, containing a main essay (about French history) and a light-hearted appendix (the famous "Scandalous Club"),⁵⁰ but later had more wide-ranging political comment essays.⁵¹ The *Rehearsal* was a Tory answer to – and initially imitator of – Tutchin's *Observer*, again in dialogue.⁵² The *Examiner*, effectively its successor, was an essay.⁵³ Again, there is limited evidence for political coordination, although the *Review* and *Examiner* were sponsored from within ministries, and there is some evidence for Whig organisation of propaganda while in opposition after 1710.⁵⁴

The nature of comment serials began to shift after the appearance of the *Tatler* in 1709. They were no longer all dominated by political comment, but came to comprise a spectrum from overt political discussion to social and moral comment. Although the *Tatler* and *Spectator* had various generic origins,⁵⁵ they can usefully be regarded as *moral* comment serials – ostensibly aimed at advancing good manners, rather than just good political arguments. Their titles and self-descriptions aligned them with the comment serial tradition: "Spectator" was cognate with "Observer" and "Examiner", and the *Tatler*'s "lucubrations" and the *Spectator*'s "speculations" resembled comment keywords like "reflections" and "observations".⁵⁶ Despite their fame, it should be emphasised that moral comment serials were outnumbered by overtly political comment serials during the 1710s. Of

⁵⁰ *A Supplementary Journal to the Advice from the Scandal. Club* (September 1704), pp. 5-6.

⁵¹ For the *Review*, see e.g. J.A. Downie, *Robert Harley and the press: propaganda and public opinion in the age of Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge, 1979); idem, 'Stating facts right'; McVeagh, *Defoe's Review*; N. Seager, "'He reviews without fear, and acts without fainting": Defoe's *Review*', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 46:1 (2012), pp. 131-54; B. Cowan, 'Daniel Defoe's *Review* and the transformations of the English periodical', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 77:1 (2014), pp. 79-110.

⁵² For the *Rehearsal*, see B. Frank, "'The excellent rehearser": Charles Leslie and the Tory party, 1688-1714', in J.D. Browning, ed., *Biography in the 18th century* (New York and London, 1980), pp. 43-68.

⁵³ For the *Examiner*, see e.g. F.H. Ellis, "'A quill worn to the pith in the service of the state": Swift's *Examiner*', in J.R. Hermann and H.J. Vienken, eds, *Proceedings of the first Munster symposium on Jonathan Swift* (München, 1985), pp. 73-82; W.A. Speck, 'The *Examiner* re-examined', in Downie and Corns, *Telling people*, pp. 34-43.

⁵⁴ Downie, *Harley and the press*, ch. 8.

⁵⁵ DeMaria, 'Periodical essay'.

⁵⁶ The *Tatler* was initially a miscellany in newspaper form.

the thirty-three comment serials published in 1709-20 with thirty or more issues, nineteen were overtly political.⁵⁷ Moreover, some of the other fourteen had a political function.⁵⁸ The *Spectator* and *Free-Thinker* (1718-21), were Whig in intent, but conveyed their partisanship more obliquely through social commentary.⁵⁹ The Whig *Guardian* (1713) began as a moral comment serial but became increasingly political, and the Tory *Entertainer* (1717-18), which contained “Remarks upon Men, Manners, Religion and Policy”, was a hybrid of political and moral.

Comment serials became less prominent during the 1720s and 1730s. This was partly due to an easing of party tensions in George I’s reign, and partly to a growth of newspapers containing comment sections, which assumed the primary place in published regular comment in the age of Walpole.⁶⁰ Eleven new comment serials with runs of thirty issues or more appeared in 1721-30, but only two in 1731-40.⁶¹ In sum, comment serials were overwhelmingly a feature of the rage of party. In 1735, William Arnall, a Walpolean propagandist, encapsulated the ephemerality of both individual comment serials and their wider moment:

“Who now reads, or even knows *Lestrangle’s Observators*, or *Defoe’s Reviews*, or *Leslie’s Rehearsals*, or the *Examiners*, with a Shoal of other Writings, all of much Noise and some Esteem in their Day? I dare say that many of the present Generation never heard of their

⁵⁷ *Moderator* (1710), *Examiner* (1710-14), *Medley* (1710-12), *Mercator* (1713-14), *British Merchant* (1713-14), *Englishman* (1713), *High-German Doctor* (1714-15), *Patriot* (1714-15), *Monitor* (1714), *Englishman* (1715), *Free-Holder* (1715-16), *Grumbler* (1715), *Occasional Courant* (1716-17), *Scourge* (1717), *Heraclitus Ridens* (1718), *Manufacturer* (1719-21), *Independent Whig* (1720-21), *Commentator* (1720), *Director* (1720-21).

⁵⁸ *Tatler* (1709-11), *Female Tatler* (1709-10), *Visions of Sir Heister Ryley* (1710-11), *Spectator* (1711-12, 1714), *Tatler* (Edinburgh, 1711), *Hermit* (1711-12), *Rhapsody* (1712), *Guardian* (1713), *Lay-Monk* (1713-14), *Lover* (1714), *Spectator* (1715), *Censor* (1715-17), *Entertainer* (1717-18), *Free-Thinker* (1718-21).

⁵⁹ A. Sullivan, *British literary magazines: The Augustan Age and the Age of Johnson, 1698-1788* (Westport, CT, 1983); B. Cowan, ‘Mr. Spectator and the coffeehouse public sphere’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37:3 (2004), pp. 345-66.

⁶⁰ E.g. the *Craftsman*, the *Champion* and *Common Sense*.

⁶¹ *Terrae Filius* (1721), *Pasquin* (1722-24), *True Briton* (1723-24), *Visiter* (1723-24), *Briton* (1723-24), *Tea Table* (1724), *Honest True Briton* (1724), *Plain Dealer* (1724-25), *Country Gentleman* (1726), *Senator* (1728), *Free Briton* (1729-35), *Hyp Doctor* (1730-41), *Auditor* (1733-34), *Prompter* (1734-36).

Names. As they were solely confined to Party and Party-quarrels, and allied only to the Squabble of the Times, they perished with Time and with Party-heats.”⁶²

II.

Most comment serials were crack partisan weapons, designed to fire regular “paper bullets” into the rage of party. In this, they had several advantages compared with pamphlets and newspapers. They were entirely flexible, being unconstrained by the need to focus on a designated subject or by a news function, and could continuously adapt their messages to the moment. Unlike pamphlets, they could also build an audience over time, and use repetition over months or years to drive their points home. Tutchin’s *Observer* was typical in this regard. Its primary aim was to defend and advance Whig constitutional principles, and to a lesser extent politicians, against Tory principles, politicians and authors, which were feared to be ascendant after the accession of Queen Anne. Tutchin took full advantage of the comment serial form to fashion a flexible and powerful Whig weapon.

To understand its workings, it is helpful to begin with the *Observer*’s worldview. For Tutchin, the ancient English constitution, the guarantor of people’s rights and liberties, needed protection from Tory threats to undermine it. The constitution had previously been threatened by Tories promoting “popery and arbitrary government” under Charles II and James II, had then been restored by the “great deliverer” William III during the Glorious Revolution, was currently safeguarded by Anne and her future Hanoverian successors, but was now challenged by resurgent Tories who supported a Jacobite restoration (the return of the deposed James II’s Catholic son). A few quotations will suffice to illustrate these positions. Tutchin stated that the *Observer* was “wholly designed for the *Interest of England, its Antient Laws and Liberties, and the Defence of the Present Government, and Her*

⁶² W. Arnall, *Opposition No Proof of Patriotism* (1735), p. 27.

Majesties *Rightful* and *Lawful Title* to the Imperial Crowns of these Kingdoms".⁶³ Elsewhere, he summarised, "Ever since I have Written a Weekly Paper, in Defence of the Queens Right to the Crown, the Settlement of the Succession on the House of *Hannover*, in Vindication of... the *Liberties of Englishmen*; the *Jacobites*, *Papists*, and *High-Flyers*... have been my Opponents".⁶⁴ He described himself as a "a *Stumbling-Block* in the way to *Popery* and *Arbitrary-Power*".⁶⁵ After Tutchin's death, Ridpath reaffirmed Tutchin's aims by stating that the *Observer* "continu'd upon the same View of defending our old Constitution, and such Parts of it as were happily restor'd to us by the late King *William*", against the "Underminers of the Constitution".⁶⁶

One striking feature of Tutchin's worldview is the prominence of *constitutional* principle, which was also central to Whig-Tory conflict more generally.⁶⁷ Consequently, a prominent theme in the *Observer* was the repackaging and representing of Whig constitutional theory – what the Countryman referred to as "*Whigish Notions of Liberty and Property, the Interest, Constitution and Laws of old England*" – to the public.⁶⁸ The *Observer* generally aligned with the ancient constitutionalist strand of Whig thought, with a heavy emphasis on English history: how the English constitution had operated in the past was how it should operate now. "My way is to look back into former Times", Tutchin wrote, "for if we do not know what our Constitution and Priviledges were *Ab Origine*, we cannot tell what Encroachments are made upon 'em now".⁶⁹ "*Revolution Principles* [i.e. the principles affirmed in the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89] were the *Principles* of our Ancestors; without them we had never known what are the Rights of *Englishmen*, and without them we had never been able to Defend those Rights to our own Use, and to leave them to Our Posterity".⁷⁰

⁶³ *Observer*, 1.16.

⁶⁴ *Observer*, 3.57.

⁶⁵ *Observer*, 2.74.

⁶⁶ *Observer*, vol. 6, preface.

⁶⁷ Kenyon, *Revolution principles*.

⁶⁸ *Observer*, 1.28.

⁶⁹ *Observer*, 3.99.

⁷⁰ *Observer*, 2.54.

When Tutchin discussed particular political issues, for instance about the role of juries or militias, he frequently accompanied these with long discussions of historical precedent.⁷¹ A totemic theme was that “the Crown of *England* was never Hereditary, but as prescrib’d by Parliament; and no one was yet a Legal King or Queen of *England*, but by the previous Consent of the People”,⁷² which he illustrated with a six-issue-long, reign-by-reign English history.⁷³ These discussions were sometimes drawn directly from treatises beloved of Whigs such as Henry Care’s *English Liberties* and John Selden’s *Historical Discourse*.⁷⁴

A second key feature was character assassination of its political enemies – those who threatened the constitution. They were presented as malicious, self-interested traitors, with unjustifiable principles. Tutchin explained that “A *High-Churchman*, is the Weather-Cock of a Steeple, turn’d about by the Wind of Secular-Interest... whose Mouth Vomits Wild-Fire, instead of Divinity... he’s for *Passive-Obedience, Non-Resistance, and Sovereign Will and Pleasure*, and other the Instruments of Slavery”.⁷⁵ Tutchin’s simplest method was the pointed use of party labels. His opponents were not usually “Tories”, but the sinister “party” or “faction” that sought to destroy liberties. Tutchin described them with a panoply of terms: non-jurors, Jacobites, Perkinites, high-churchmen, high-flyers, papists, Tackers, memorialists, Tantivy, Tories.⁷⁶ These labels could run together: “I smell a *Rat, a Popish-High-Flying-Non-juring Rat*”.⁷⁷ He conflated more moderate with more extreme labels to tar the former with the latter. For instance, he presented high-church Anglicans as crypto-Catholics, arguing that “*High-Church* and *Popery* are the same things under different

⁷¹ *Observer*, 2.37, 2.48.

⁷² *Observer*, 1.100.

⁷³ *Observer*, 3.9-14.

⁷⁴ E.g. *Observer*, 2.41ff (from Care), 3.9ff (from Selden).

⁷⁵ *Observer*, 1.25.

⁷⁶ “Perkinites”: Jacobites (referring to Perkin Warbeck, a fifteenth century Pretender). “Tackers”: extreme Tories who “tacked” anti-Dissenter legislation to a taxation bill in 1704 to try to force it through Parliament. “Memorialists”: supporters of James Drake’s *Memorial of the Church of England* (1705).

⁷⁷ *Observer*, 2.78.

Denominations”,⁷⁸ and non-jurors, who accepted Anne, as effectively Jacobites, who did not: “the *Nonjurors, Jacobites and Popish Priests*, are too near of Kin; they are possess’d with the same Evil Spirit”.⁷⁹

These two themes, which appeared *passim*, were accompanied by other thrusts of comment that were more precisely topical. Prominent here were answers to Tory printed publications that streamed off the presses. Tutchin considered print a leading Tory weapon against the constitution. “Since the *Jacobites and Papists* take the Liberty to Write against the Government, the Rights of the Kingdom, and the *Hannover* Succession; I shall continue to oppose them,” he wrote; “I only catch the *Fire-Balls of Contention* in my hand, and throw ’em back at the heads of those who first flung ’em”.⁸⁰ Or, “While these Men Write I must continue to Answer them; ’tis necessary *Publick Poison* should have a *Publick Antidote*”.⁸¹ The *Observer* answered myriad Tory books and pamphlets, including Henry Sacheverell’s *The Political Union* (1702) and *The Character of a Low Church-Man* (1702), Sir Humphrey Mackworth’s *Peace at Home* (1703), Edward Ward’s *The Dissenter* (1704), Charles Leslie’s *The Wolf Stript of his Shepherd’s Cloathing* (1703) and *Cassandra* (1704), Sackville Tufton’s *History of Faction* (1705), and James Drake’s *Memorial of the Church of England* (1705), and also the main Tory comment serials, *Heraclitus Ridens*, the *Rehearsal* and *Mercurius Politicus*. By returning fire against Tory print weapons, Tutchin hoped to prevent the public falling for sinister Tory designs.

These are just three prominent themes of the *Observer*’s Whig comment; it should be emphasised that they were part of a shifting and flexible mix. They were also common to many comment serials. Comment serials that contained much repackaged partisan constitutional theory include the *Rehearsal*, *Mercurius Politicus*, and the *Free-Holder*. Identifying the enemy as the “party” or “faction”

⁷⁸ *Observer*, 4.91.

⁷⁹ *Observer*, 3.83. Non-jurors accepted post-Revolution monarchs on a *de facto* but not *de jure* basis.

⁸⁰ *Observer*, 3.67.

⁸¹ *Observer*, 3.50.

and illuminating their character through myriad labels is so ubiquitous as to require no illustration. L'Estrange's *Observer* and the *Examiner* began as vehicles for answering Whig publications, the former proclaiming in its first issue that "Tis the *Press* that has made 'um *Mad*, and the *Press* must set 'um *Right* again", and the latter that "Some... Papers I intend to *Examine*, and set People right in their Opinions".⁸²

The *Observer's* construction as a Whig partisan weapon was complicated by two factors. First, it did not generally describe itself using the term "Whig". Tutchin "hate[d] the very Name and Notion of a Party", instead adopting more general, patriotic labels. "I am of the *Queens Party*... I am of the Party of those that are in the *English Interest*: I am on the side of *Truth*, and love all that are so, let 'em be *High or Low-Church, Dissenters, Whigs, or Tories*".⁸³ Tutchin did praise the "Whigs" as "Honest Fellows" and the "*Loyal Party*",⁸⁴ and was occasionally himself labelled as a Whig within the *Observer*,⁸⁵ but the *Observer* did not usually identify as Whig. Secondly, the *Observer* was not necessarily linked to Whig politicians. Despite some scholars' claims,⁸⁶ there is no evidence that it was sponsored by the Whig Junto, the quintet of lords who dominated Whig high politics. A Junto connection was alleged by opponents, but Tutchin denied that he was "assisted in [his] Writings by a Club of Whig Lords" or that "the *Whig Potentates* did send [him] a *Observoring*", and it is impossible to judge the matter from these claims alone.⁸⁷ However, the Junto cannot have been responsible for founding the *Observer*, because in 1702-03 it often criticised the "modern" Whigs, a term connected with the Junto. "What is it to poor *England*," Tutchin asked, "whether the *Procurers* of Her *Ruin* be *Modern Whiggs* or *Old Tories*?"⁸⁸ It is plausible that Tutchin himself was

⁸² L'Estrange, *Observer*, 1.1; *Examiner*, 1.1.

⁸³ *Observer*, 3.95, 5.1.

⁸⁴ *Observer*, 3.51, 4.9.

⁸⁵ E.g. *Observer*, 4.41.

⁸⁶ J.O. Richards, *Party propaganda under Queen Anne: the general elections of 1702-1713* (Athens, GA, 1972), p. 64; T. Harris, *Politics under the later Stuarts: party conflict in a divided society, 1660-1715* (London, 1993), p. 186.

⁸⁷ *Observer*, 3.24, 4.39.

⁸⁸ *Observer*, 1.76. See also 1.73, 1.87, 2.19, 6.61.

responsible for the project, as he had the necessary experience, will, financial incentive to publish, and “old” Whig opinions, or perhaps it derived from the old Whig circles in which Tutchin moved.⁸⁹ Certainly, there are implications for the *Observer*’s voice: it was that of a Whig, not of *the* Whigs. Comment serials were partisan weapons, but they were not simply examples of “party propaganda”, writing on behalf of politicians under clear party labels.

III.

Did comment serials matter? How widely did people read them, or even know about them? What impression, if any, did they make on partisan culture? Questions of this sort haunt all scholars of early modern print, and are invariably hampered by patchy sources. Fortunately, the evidence available for the consumption of comment serials tends to be more extensive than for the consumption of, say, pamphlets, because serials could provoke fresh reactions with each issue, making a greater volume of reactions more likely, and because serials could discuss their own reception. Sources for the *Observer* include pamphlet and serial reactions, discussions of reception within the *Observer* (especially accounts of Londoners’ responses reported by the Countryman to the *Observer*), readers’ letters printed in the *Observer*,⁹⁰ advertisements, and personal diaries and correspondence.

The primary impression given by these sources, shared by Tutchin and his opponents, is that the *Observer* had substantial public reach or even fame, and that Tutchin was a significant public figure. The Countryman reported to the *Observer* that people in London “talk most of Persons,

⁸⁹ *The Whole Life of Mr. William Fuller* (1703), pp. 62-63.

⁹⁰ The authenticity of readers’ letters is hard to prove, but certainly many were sent to comment serials: see *Observer*, 3.2; *Heraclitus Ridens* (1703), 1.24; *Mercurius Politicus*, 1.9. At least one letter to the *Observer* survives in manuscript: *Manuscripts of the Duke of Portland*, vol. 4, p. 92, addressed to Tutchin’s printer, John How.

and I think they talk more of you than any body else".⁹¹ One Tory pamphlet asked readers to search for Tutchin's honesty, "it being neither Just nor Reasonable, that a Man, especially so publick, and well known as he is, should live without it".⁹² Both sides also agreed that the *Observer* influenced public opinion. Tutchin claimed success in discovering truth to his readers, asserting that no one would hinder him "from opening the Peoples Eyes".⁹³ For Tutchin's opponents, however, the *Observer* corrupted the public with its dangerous views. According to the *Rehearsal*, the Whigs'

"... weekly penny Papers... have done much more *Mischief* than [the Whigs' books and pamphlets]. For the greatest Part of the *People* do not Read *Books*, Most of them cannot Read at all. But they will Gather together about one that can Read, and Listen to an *Observer* or *Review* (as I have seen them in the Streets) where all the *Principles* of *Rebellion* are Instill'd into them..."⁹⁴

Mercurius Politicus was similarly worried about the impact of "Mobb Orators", including Tutchin, whose "Attempts... to debauch the People, and stifle the Reverence and Obedience due to Authority, in the promisc[u]ous Croud of unauthoriz'd unqualified Intermedlers with Affairs of *State* and *Church*, must (if not timely suppress and punish) end in the ruin of *Civil Government*".⁹⁵

These claims were rhetorical commonplaces, and on their own should not be taken literally. But the *Observer* must genuinely have been perceived as influential by many Tories, given that they produced dozens of print responses (Tutchin himself estimated around 50).⁹⁶ Indeed, the three main

⁹¹ *Observer*, 2.97.

⁹² *A Hue and Cry, after the Observators Honesty* (1705?).

⁹³ *Observer*, 3.17.

⁹⁴ *Rehearsal*, vol. 1, preface.

⁹⁵ *Mercurius Politicus*, 1.2.

⁹⁶ Horsley, 'Trial', p. 124, n. 1, estimates "at least seventeen" pamphlet attacks on Tutchin. See *Observer*, 6.5, for Tutchin's estimate. I have counted 44 books and pamphlets answering Tutchin in 1702-07, including supportive publications.

Tory comment serials of this period were all established entirely or partly to oppose the *Observer*: *Heraclitus Ridens* was “writ in opposition to *John Tutchin’s* Common-wealth *Observer*”;⁹⁷ the *Rehearsal* explained that the “Remedy” for “these Pernicious *Papers*” (the *Observer* and the *Review*) was “to Answer them... in the same Method at these *Papers*, to come out *Weekly*, and to be Read by the *People*”;⁹⁸ and *Mercurius Politicus* targeted “factious Incendiaries”, namely “the *Observer*, *Review*, &c... pass[ing] for moderate Men by railing with a Pretence for Moderation”.⁹⁹ The repeated efforts to investigate or silence Tutchin from government or Parliament,¹⁰⁰ and the fact that some even sought to silence Tutchin physically, also reflect fears that the *Observer* had genuine influence.

But did it actually make an impression on the public? A contemporary estimate suggests that the *Observer* had a print-run of 1000 copies per issue in 1704.¹⁰¹ This is a plausible figure, fairly typical for topical publications.¹⁰² This may seem limited, but the *Observer’s* actual circulation would in fact have been far higher, for three reasons. First, if 1000 copies were printed *per issue*, the total number of *Observers* in circulation over its complete run would have been vast, perhaps over a million. Anyone who encountered just one of these physical papers became a direct consumer of the *Observer*. Secondly, multiple people could have encountered each copy – a historiographical commonplace drawn from Addison’s “modest computation” that twenty people read each copy of the *Spectator*.¹⁰³ For the *Observer* specifically, there is considerable evidence for multiple consumption, especially in public houses such as coffeehouses. One contemporary in 1705 observed that the *Observer* and *Review* were the “entertainment of most coffee-houses in town”.¹⁰⁴ The

⁹⁷ *Review*, 1.39.

⁹⁸ *Rehearsal*, vol. 1, preface.

⁹⁹ *Mercurius Politicus*, 1.1.

¹⁰⁰ Horsley, ‘Trial’.

¹⁰¹ J.R. Sutherland, ‘The circulation of newspapers and literary periodicals, 1700-30’, *Library*, 4th s., 15 (1934), p. 111.

¹⁰² Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering*, p. 80.

¹⁰³ *Spectator*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Downie, *Harley and the press*, p. 9.

Countryman's anecdotes about the *Observer's* consumption are overwhelmingly set in coffeehouses, and present various multiple consumption scenarios: calling up a copy to consult (presumably later returned to allow consultation by others), reading a copy aloud to other coffeehouse-goers, and writing marginal notes on the copy for other readers.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, he suggests that reading the *Observer* was a key reason for visiting a coffeehouse at all: when one coffeehouse's copy was stolen, this was "a great Loss to a Publick-House, [as] many may come to Read it, and go away without spending a Penny for want of it".¹⁰⁶ Thirdly, even if someone had not read or heard an *Observer* directly, it might be encountered second-hand through conversations or references in other publications. Through such *indirect* consumption, the *Observer's* reach extended beyond those who encountered physical copies. Combining these insights, it becomes possible to see how the *Observer* could have acquired fame on the scale suggested by contemporaries.

The *Observer's* readership reached across the social scale: the Duke of Marlborough received copies while on campaign in Europe,¹⁰⁷ while the poor had *Observers* lent to them at a reduced rate.¹⁰⁸ The target audience of advertisements suggests middling readers too, for instance well-educated youths, merchants, and parents seeking boarding schools for their children.¹⁰⁹

Geographically, the *Observer's* impact was undoubtedly concentrated in London, but readers' letters indicate readers in Berkshire, Devon, Hertfordshire, the Isle of Wight and Suffolk,¹¹⁰ and advertisements directed readers to products across Britain.¹¹¹ Evidence is lacking for the gender profile of consumption. This is striking given the extensive contemporary (and historiographical)

¹⁰⁵ (Respectively) *Observer*, 4.51, 1.48, 2.97.

¹⁰⁶ *Observer*, 1.37.

¹⁰⁷ H.L. Snyder, ed, *The Marlborough-Godolphin correspondence* (Oxford, 1975), vol. 1, p. 344.

¹⁰⁸ *Observer*, 6.14, 6.17, 6.34.

¹⁰⁹ *Observer*, 2.1, 2.3, 4.2.

¹¹⁰ *Observer*, 3.87, 4.9, 4.16, 4.17, 4.34.

¹¹¹ E.g. *Observer*, 4.1 (an elixir available in "most Cities and great Towns in England, and some in Scotland and Ireland").

discussion of female readership of some contemporary serials, perhaps hinting that political comment serials like the *Observer* were more of a male preserve.¹¹²

How did people interact with comment serials? The chief pattern that emerges for the *Observer* is of having been the subject of *partisan* consumption, with reactions being supportive or hostile. This was certainly the impression of several contemporaries. During Tutchin's trial, one juror asked to be excused because he had previously criticised the *Observer*, but the attorney-general dismissed this on the grounds that "I believe no Man... has read [the *Observer*], but has given his Opinion of [it] one way or other".¹¹³ Summarising his visits to some London coffeehouses, the Countryman reports that Tutchin divided opinion, as "some say you are a very Honest Gentleman; others say you are a meer Rogue, a Seditious, Pestilent Fellow".¹¹⁴ Partisan consumption has received some attention in histories of early modern reading,¹¹⁵ and it is contended here that the partisan consumption of comment serials (and other topical print) should be examined as an aspect of the culture of the "rage of party".

Various patterns in the partisan consumption of comment serials may be observed. One is that people often *prejudged* their reaction to a comment serial from its partisan identity, and used it to confirm their own partisan thinking. "Whatever I Write is fore-Judg'd by some Persons before it is Written", Tutchin lamented.¹¹⁶ According to the Countryman, "all the *Papists*, the *Perkinites* and

¹¹² On female readership and serials, see H. Berry, *Gender, society and print culture in late-Stuart England: the cultural world of the Athenian Mercury* (Aldershot, 2003).

¹¹³ *Complete Collection of State-Trials* (1730 edn), vol. 5, p. 534.

¹¹⁴ *Observer*, 2.80.

¹¹⁵ E.g. Harris, *London crowds*, ch. 5; S. Zwicker, 'Reading the margins: politics and the habits of appropriation', in K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker, eds, *Refiguring revolutions: aesthetics and politics from the English revolution to the romantic revolution* (Berkeley, CA, and London, 1998), pp. 101-15; K. Sharpe, *Reading revolutions: the politics of reading in early modern England* (New Haven and London, 2000); K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker, 'Introduction: discovering the Renaissance reader', in their *Reading, society and politics in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 1-37; S. Zwicker, 'The constitution of opinion and the pacification of reading', in *ibid*, pp. 295-316; M. Green, 'Londoners and the news: responses to the political press, 1695-1742' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2011), ch. 5.

¹¹⁶ *Observer*, 5.10.

High-Flyers... Read the Observators on purpose to find Faults".¹¹⁷ Another coffeehouse anecdote provides a stark manifestation of this attitude:

"'Twas but t'other day, a Gentleman, in a *Coffee-House*, was reading the Queens *Proclamation* for putting in Execution *An Act of Parliament for the Encouragement and Encrease of Seamen...* the Gentleman lik'd the Method very well; but when he was told, *That the same Thing had been Printed on the Observer long before the Passing of that Act*, he said, *That the Observer was a Rascal, and wonder'd that the Parliament, or any Body else, would hearken to what such a Fellow said.*"¹¹⁸

The *Observer* was also read supportively by people who were already Whigs. One Tory pamphlet observed their "fondness" for the *Observer*, and that "they every day, every where, affirm what it asserts".¹¹⁹ Another claimed that "there is no *Book* or *Paper* comes out, that is so much a *Party-Book*, and for which the whole *Faction* is so Answerable as this; it being *Hugg'd* and *Cherish'd* by them All".¹²⁰ Individuals who expressed opinions on Tutchin also fit these patterns. Thomas Hearne, a Tory, called Tutchin the "Author of a scandalous Libell call'd ye *Observer*", while the Whig Earl of Peterborough considered him a "true Englishman".¹²¹ Despite claims about comment serials' ability to influence public opinion, their main significance may lie in affirming and galvanising existing prejudices, rather than changing minds.

¹¹⁷ *Observer*, 3.24.

¹¹⁸ *Observer*, 5.6.

¹¹⁹ *Reflections on the Management of Sir George Rooke* (1704), p. 2.

¹²⁰ *Cassandra* (1704), part 2, pp. 21-22.

¹²¹ C.E. Doble, ed., *Remarks and collections of Thomas Hearne* (Oxford, 1885-1921), vol 2., p. 53; *Manuscripts of the Duke of Portland*, vol. 4, p. 454.

Comment serials also encouraged partisan “reading communities” – collective reading by groups of partisans, both supportive and hostile, that shaped their reactions.¹²² The Countryman’s reports of collective coffeehouse reading often suggest this. For instance, in one coffeehouse:

“... presently in comes a Slovenly Sort of a Fellow, and Seating himself with... some of his Acquaintance, he call’d for the *Observer*, which being brought him... he lifted up his Voice and Read to the whole Audience, at every three or four Lines he would stop, and looking on his Company, says he, *This Fellow is a Blockhead*; then a little further, *This Fellow is a Fool*; then *He’s a Rascal, a Rogue, a Villain*; so that by the time he had Read the Paper through, he had given you a Hundred fine Titles.”¹²³

Here, the oral reader and his acquaintance share a hostile reading. The Countryman reported the same in a supportive context: “I went to a Coffee-House in *London*, where some Gentlemen were Reading your Paper... I believe ’em to be all True *Englishmen* that were in the Company, for all of ’em heartily wish’d you might prove a true Prophet”.¹²⁴ The *Observer* also nurtured a *virtual* partisan community based on individual readers knowing that they were part of a larger body of separate supportive readers.¹²⁵ One reader wrote to Tutchin that “My self, with all other true *Englishmen* that Love their Country, give you Thanks for Exposing the Frauds of the Nation which comes within your Knowledge”¹²⁶ Another submitted information about the malicious actions of Devon Tories with the comment that “I know thy Zeal to make Good Use of all things; I send this in Love... Thy Friends Love thee, as much as thine Enemies Hate thee”.¹²⁷ Comment serials thus

¹²² Stanley Fish’s concept of “interpretive communities”, which posits clusters of readers as the key factor determining textual meaning, is useful. See Sharpe and Zwicker, ‘Introduction’, pp. 8-9.

¹²³ *Observer*, 1.48.

¹²⁴ *Observer*, 1.56.

¹²⁵ This point was famously argued for newspaper-reading and *national* identity in B. Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London and New York, 1991 edn), p. 35.

¹²⁶ *Observer*, 2.98.

¹²⁷ *Observer*, 4.9.

contributed to the development of partisan communities by encouraging the association and mutual affirmation of partisans, both physically and virtually.

Moreover, comment serials functioned as prominent representatives of parties in public. Regardless of whether the *Observer* was actually sponsored by Whig politicians, it was *represented* as a Whig party mouthpiece. Tories depicted Tutchin as the “*Cryer and Trumpet of the Party*”, the “*Party’s Scribe*”, the “*Mouth and Pillar of Whiggs and Dissenters*”.¹²⁸ One pamphlet claimed that the *Observer* had been started “according to the Faction’s Request”, after “a Party of Men... chose [Tutchin] for their Secretary”.¹²⁹ *Heraclitus Ridens* justified its focus on the *Observer* with a Virgilian tag: “*Crimine ab uno disce omnes – From this one Man know the Nature of his Party*”.¹³⁰ Such claims were not uncommon. Other comment serials deemed to speak for the Whigs in this way include the *Review*, *Tatler*, *Medley* and *Englishman*, and they were often linked in lists of Whig voices, especially the *Observer* and *Review*.¹³¹ Comment serials were similarly identified as party mouthpieces on the Tory side. This suggests that comment serials played a significant role as markers of party divisions in public, manifesting and representing party in a tangible form to observers.

IV.

Comment serials such as John Tutchin’s *Observer* were a distinctive and significant feature of the partisan culture of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Britain, and deserve greater

¹²⁸ *Cassandra* (1704), part 2, p. 12; *Last New Prologues and Epilogues Relating to the Life of the Observer* (1703), p. 17; *Rehearsal*, 1.2.

¹²⁹ *The Examination, Tryal, and Condemnation of Rebellion Ob-r* (1703), p. 7.

¹³⁰ *Heraclitus Ridens* (1703), 1.4.

¹³¹ These examples identify these serials as Whig mouthpieces alongside the *Observer*. *Review*: e.g. *The Republican Bullies* (1705), p. 1. *Tatler*: e.g. *A Letter to the Examiner* (1710), p. 4. *Medley*: e.g. *The D. of M-h’s Vindication* (1711), p. 4. *Englishman*: e.g. *John Tutchin’s Ghost to Richard St—le* (1714), pp. 7-8.

attention in accounts of the rage of party. Beginning in the Succession Crisis and exploding during the reign of Anne, regular printed publications that were designed to provide discussions rather than reports were produced and circulated. They were overwhelmingly partisan in intent and construction, although direct links to party politicians are usually hard to prove. Through their regularity and their focus on comment, they became the most pronounced and undiluted partisan voices echoing around the public sphere. The *Observer* was one of the most prominent comment serials of the period. It was constructed as a Whig weapon to fire twice-weekly rounds of paper bullets, charged with a flexible and shifting mixture of partisan comment, including repackaged Whig constitutional theory, the tarring of Tories as malicious and having incorrect principles, and responses to a continuous stream of Tory publications. Although the evidential picture is limited, it appears that the major comment serials were well-known, and that they contributed to partisan culture through patterns in their consumption, including by reinforcing and galvanising partisan identities, by facilitating the development of real and virtual partisan “reading communities”, and by manifesting and representing party divisions in public.