Russ Castronovo, *Propaganda 1776: Secrets, Leaks, and Revolutionary Communications in Early America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 247. £22.99. ISBN 978019935490.

Through 'tracking the movements of stolen documents, satires, and published letters from the 1770s to 1790s' (4), *Propaganda 1776* persuasively argues that 'media dissemination created a vital but seldom acknowledged connection between propaganda and democracy' during the late eighteenth century that should make us rethink the later history of these systems. In its far from singular assumption that the nation's founding moment can be retrofitted to explain more recent historical events, however, the book also displays an analogical ambition that Castronovo sometimes fails to tread around lightly enough. As the title of his first chapter – 'States Secrets: Ben Franklin and WikiLeaks' – boldly announces, Castronovo is partly interested in delineating 'various steps in a temporal back-and-forth in order to provoke a discussion about communication and the limits of consent' (23). But while the two halves of this opening section – which argue that the WikiLeaks controversy saw an ironic substitution of liberal subjectivity for network anonymity, and that Franklin's involvement in the distribution of letters stolen from Governor Thomas Hutchinson relied on relinquishing his personal agency – are individually compelling, the juxtaposition of these cases proves problematic. Given the pervasive re-presentation of Founding Fatherdom in American culture since the Revolution, Castronovo is surely right that 'one might imagine *Time* magazine, if it existed in the eighteenth century, putting Ben Franklin on its cover as "person of the year" for 1773' (49), but claims for Franklin 'as a sort of hyperlink' or 'as much a rock star in his day as [Julian] Assange is in ours' (44) are more tenuous, and overall the connection between eighteenth-century information networks and twenty-first digital communications articulated here is both too hedged in by contrasts and too broad in its congruities to carry much analytical weight. 'Some readers may find my occasional engagement with modern media jarring' (24), Castronovo acknowledges in his Introduction and, indeed, for this reviewer, at least, the initial chapter raises far more questions than it answers.

Fortunately, the ensuing chapters treat the relation between data leaks past and present in a subtler and more integrated way, with the result that a much fuller picture of the Revolutionary-era's distinctive mode of 'media dissemination' is allowed to emerge. Finely detailed and sharply focused, each of the next three chapters very effectively locates the work of a prominent political writer – Mercy Otis Warren, Thomas Paine, and Benjamin Franklin Bache, respectively – within a 'sociology of texts that comprised the postal system, printshops, newspaper columns, and groups of readers that variously augmented, amplified, and disseminated [their] original meanings' (74). Perhaps most impressive, though, is the fifth and final chapter, which recuperates the political poetry of Philip Freneau (often dismissed as mere hackwork both upon publication and since), by probing the formal advantages late eighteenth-century verse rather than prose might have been considered to possess in conveying a social critique. Here, the close attention that Castronovo devotes to differences and shifts between genres throughout the book pays off in a wonderfully thought-provoking analysis of an unfairly neglected figure.

Although several other recent books on early American information flows offer a more thickly contextualized and richly theorized account of the infrastructure of Revolutionary-era communications – among them William B. Warner's *Protocols of Liberty: Communication Innovation and the American Revolution* (2013) and Lindsay O'Neill's *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (2014) – Castronovo's study is ultimately vital reading for its emphasis on two profoundly important conceptualizations of that communication: printscape and propaganda. The former is Castronovo's term for the decentralized, disorderly, genre-hopping nature of information distribution in late eighteenth-

century America – a model of textual flux that helps us to understand how the medium of Whig writing can sometimes be more significant, and more radical, than its material content. In this respect, as Castronovo puts it: ‘Rather than parsing the single letter, pamphlet, or other document, the interpretative charge is to read its strange travels and look for the connections it creates’ (41). Accordingly, then, a consideration of these travels and connections also helps us to read the exhortatory element of Whig literature in a new fashion, since the key characteristics of propaganda as identified by Castronovo (propagation, mobility, and emotion) align with the dynamics of the Revolutionary-era printscape in potentially radical ways. Indeed, in a powerful rebuttal of the twentieth-century tendency to see propaganda as an oppressive, top-down phenomenon, inflicted on passive consumers, *Propaganda 1776* argues that in its late eighteenth-century guise biased information was a variously-generated, horizontally-distributed mode of communication that had the potential – even when blatantly false – to broaden the parameters of political debate.

It may not always be clear enough where Revolutionary-era printscape and propaganda are at odds with each other, something a greater attention to the travels and travails of Loyalist propaganda would have helped to address, but in bringing the two concepts together Castronovo has forged a highly productive set of tools that a range of other scholars can put to work. In short, whether dislodging the well-established tendency to read Whig texts as avatars of enlightened rationality through its recognition that ‘the path toward American independence required … the spread of unreliable intelligence’ (4), or helping us to see a ‘necessary yet disquieting relationship between propaganda and democracy’ (28), this book commands notice.

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