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January 17, 2006 — As it turns out, today is Benjamin Franklin's 300th birthday. Writer, typographer, printer-publisher-politician, inventor, statesman, gentleman scientist, lover, linguist, librarian, and the first postmaster general of the United States, Franklin was the consummate networker, distributing his ideas far and wide through a dizzying range of practices. He established a network of printing franchises by sending former apprentices to set up shop in new towns and collecting dues from them; he travelled extensively to London and the Courts of France fostering alliances that helped form a nation; he wrote incisive arguments and entertainments under a constellation of pseudonyms to suit the purpose-at-hand including the Causist, Silence Do Good, Busy-Body, Poor Richard, and J. T.; he advocated a paper currency to facilitate liberal distribution of goods and services; he (reportedly) spread his affections among any number of women in the colonies and beyond; and he published a weekly newspaper, an occasional magazine and the annual *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Along the way, Franklin pursued his polymathic interests, inventing (a partial list): the medical catheter, the Armonica (a musical instrument), a phonetic alphabet, the circulating stove, swim fins, bifocals, the lightning rod, and founding the first public lending library, a volunteer fire department, the American Philosophical Society, a university, and the United States Postal Service.

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston in 1706, the youngest son of seventeen children of Josiah Franklin, a candle maker and merchant. He studied briefly at Boston Latin School before being removed for a more practical training. By age 12, he was apprenticed to his older brother James, a printer and publisher of the first independent colonial newspaper, the *New England Courant*. (1) Initially young Benjamin assisted with page composition, typesetting, leading, brushing, burnishing, and miscellaneous production tasks, receiving an intimate education in the mechanics of printing. James's busy shop was a nexus of pamphleteering, producing pithy and pointed documents to disseminate political points of view. Further, the *Courant* provided the most widely distributed communication platform in Boston. As an increasingly competent writer himself, Franklin wished to add his voice to the public discourse circling around the print shop. He knew his older brother wouldn't consent to print his writing, so he tried another tactic.

Franklin assumed an alter ego, Mrs. Silence Dogood, the dignified widow of a country parson. Writing under this pseudonym, he crafted a series of letters that were both entertaining and critical of Boston's Puritan establishment. Given his insider knowledge of the *New England Courant's* production schedule, Franklin carefully slipped the letters under the front door of the shop late at night. The writing was funny and the contents substantial. James Franklin published the first of eight Silence Dogood letters on April 2, 1722, and Mrs. Dogood quickly gained a wide readership. Franklin begins the initial letter with a sly acknowledgment of the power of the pen name, writing:

And since it is observed, that the Generality of People, now a days, are unwilling either to commend or dispraise what they read, until they are in some measure informed who or what the Author of it is, whether he be poor or rich, old or young, a Schollar or a Leather Apron Man, &c. and give their Opinion of the Performance, according to the Knowledge which they have of the Author's Circumstances, it may not be amiss to begin with a short Account of my past Life and present Condition, that the Reader may not be at a Loss to judge whether or no my Lucubrations are worth his reading. (2)

By the time that the eighth Silence Dogood letter was printed, Benjamin had unveiled himself as their author, much to James's displeasure. The younger brother now commanding too much attention, their relationship fell apart, and Benjamin left Boston without completing his apprenticeship. He went first to New York, then on to Philadelphia.

Benjamin Franklin arrived in Philadelphia in 1723, at the age of 17. He found printing work and lodging with Samuel Keimer and soon established his own print shop. By 1728 he had befriended the city's mayor, assimilated into polite society, and established a modest living as one of three printers in Philadelphia. As both a writer and a printer, Franklin enjoyed a privileged position from which to distribute his ideas, which were rather distributed themselves: he advocated the use of paper currency, detailed the cyclical patterns of weather systems, and dispensed sage advice, including the following, "to a young tradesman," in 1748:

Courteous Reader, Remember that TIME is money. (3)

Being intimately acquainted with the production process from writing to editing to typesetting to page composition to printing, Franklin knew that it was important not only WHAT was said or WHO said it but TO WHOM it was said. Writing and printing would take him only so far; the real power of print production, like any mass medium, lay in its distribution. The primary network of the time was the postal system, which had grown up around several colonial roads (such as the Boston Post Road, aka US 1, from New York to Boston via Providence). Unfortunately for Franklin's ambitions, his rival Andrew Bradford both published Philadelphia's only newspaper, the *American Weekly Mercury*, and served as postmaster of Pennsylvania. Bradford thus

commanded first access to news from afar while also directing the network for distributing his newspaper. The result was a virtual monopoly on what was news and who read it.

Franklin contrived to reverse these circumstances. He first tried to set up his own newspaper but was too slow: his intentions leaked, and the city's third printer, his former employer and landlord Samuel Keimer, slapdashly assembled and launched his own journal, grandly named the *Universal Instructor in All Arts and Sciences and Pennsylvania Gazette*. Figuring that the small town of Philadelphia couldn't possibly accommodate three newspapers, Franklin resolved to eliminate one. (4) Using his supple pen and exploiting the triangulated relationship between Keimer, Bradford, and himself, Franklin wrote a series of letters to the established *American Weekly Mercury* under the pseudonym Busy-Body. The first letter began by suggesting the author's intent to enliven the paper's dull if respectable pages:

I design this to acquaint you, that I, who have long been one of your Courteous Readers, have lately entertain'd some Thoughts of setting up for an Author my Self; not out of the least Vanity, I assure you, or Desire of showing my Parts, but purely for the Good of my Country.

I have often observ'd with Concern, that your Mercury is not always equally entertaining. The Delay of Ships expected in, and want of fresh Advices from Europe, make it frequently very Dull; and I find the Freezing of our River has the same Effect on News as on Trade. (5)

The Busy-Body letters took a prominent role in the *Mercury*, appearing on the front page with a large byline. They served both to boost the established paper and spurn the upstart *Gazette*, which at the time consisted primarily of serialized encyclopedia entries. Keimer responded to Busy-Body's assaults in an increasingly shrill tone and desperate manner; the ensuing war of words left him and his newspaper in considerable debt. In 1729, Keimer was briefly imprisoned, then fled to Barbados, selling his newspaper to Franklin as he was leaving town. (6)

The *Pennsylvania Gazette* provided Franklin with a platform for his provocative publishing, and over the years he developed a substantial reputation. By 1737 his newspaper had supplanted Bradford's staid *Mercury*, and Franklin was appointed postmaster of Philadelphia. Benjamin Franklin now commanded the central position that he had angled for: he was a producer of the news with a proud tradesman's intimate knowledge of printing; he was a writer who knew the power of the pen and the authorial position; and he was postmaster, directing and redesigning the networks of information distribution. This combination of an on-the-ground knowledge and a from-the-sky view served him extraordinarily well. Franklin soon graduated to postmaster of Pennsylvania and, in 1753, he was appointed joint postmasters general for the Crown. As before, with his network of printers, constellation of pen names, and multiple business associations, Franklin succeeded in appointing friends and allies to many of the subordinate postmaster jobs throughout the colonies, ensuring himself a privileged position at the hub of this increasingly critical distribution network.

By 1760 Postmaster Franklin had radically reorganized the postal service, establishing mile markers on roads, mapping new and shorter routes (post riders now carried mail at night between Philadelphia and New York, cutting delivery time in half), and developing post roads from Maine to Florida, from New York to Canada. For the first time, mail between the colonies and England operated on a regular schedule with announced times, connecting the Colonies to each other and to Mother England while at the same time beginning to articulate an as-yet-unformed nation. Along with all of these improvements, Franklin was able to report an operating budget surplus to the Crown by 1760, the first time that the postal service had made economic sense. By 1774, however, Franklin was relieved of his duties for actions sympathetic to the cause of the colonies. Shortly thereafter he was appointed chairman of the committee of investigation to establish a postal system at the Continental Congress. Then, on July 26, 1775, Franklin was appointed the first postmaster general of the brand-new United States of America. (7)

In the words of the United States Postal Service, the current USPS "descends in an unbroken line from the system [Benjamin Franklin] planned and placed into operation." (8) Currently, the Postal Service is the third-largest employer in the country (after the Department of Defense and Wal-Mart.) Operating as an independent branch of the executive branch of the United States government, the post office enjoys de facto monopoly status on delivery of first-class and third-class letters, in which long-distance mail-delivery rates are essentially subsidized by delivery of short-distance letters. Exceptions to this monopoly exist for delivery of parcels and extremely urgent letters, giving rise to a number of fierce competitors, including, of course, FedEx, UPS, and DHL. Recently, increasing reliance on electronic communication including telephone, fax, and e-mail has exerted substantial pressures on this distribution network conceived and implemented 230 years ago by a Philadelphia printer.

The United States Postal Service remains (for the near future, anyway) an almost-anachronism — a network right at the edge of obsolescence, used every day and yet resembling a relic. Because of its curious status, it sheds light on changing paradigms and patterns of information distribution today. As a distribution network, the Postal Service is democratic, public, available, and affordable. It facilitates one-to-one, asynchronous communication over great distance, and is always "on," efficient, economic, and reliable (well . . .). But

of course this description corresponds to many other distribution networks today. When the postal system disappears, what replaces it? Certainly the synergized Mass Media Mogul model of distribution networks like 20th Century Fox or NBC are not good enough.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri concisely describe a contemporary distribution pattern in the course of their political treatise/self-help book *Empire*. Hardt and Negri identify a contemporary condition where design, production, and distribution occur at one place and in real time. Suddenly writers can print their own texts, designers can produce on the fly, and printers can distribute instantly. What is needed, when it is needed, where it is needed: this kind of generalist approach and a just-in-time mode of production pries open a space of resistance for small actors in a massive system. Ideas can be designed, produced, multiplied, and distributed on demand.

Benjamin Franklin might be excited:

A great empire, like a great cake, is most easily diminished at the edges. (9)

Instrumental in the mass media of his day, Franklin proposed another model of distribution. Rather than concentrating resources and commanding an assembly line of content, design, production, and distribution, Franklin retained a fundamental pride in the skills he'd first learned as a printer's apprentice. He countered the Media Mogul with the Networked Tradesman — an individual highly skilled and committed to his work within an extended network of distributed preoccupations, assistants, pen names, jobs, friends, politicians, inventions, and hobbies. He laid his model bare in his *9th Poor Richard's Almanack* (1742) saying:

He that hath a Trade, hath an Estate. (10)

Successfully working as an individual within a massive network, Franklin realized through practice an exquisite understanding of the power of distribution that remains resonant 300 years later: happy birthday, Benjamin. Look no further than the front page of his newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* — centered in the bottom margin, Franklin proudly added a byline where design, writing, production, and distribution collapse into one space and five words:

Printed by B. Franklin, Post-Master.

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## Sources

1. Various authors, "Benjamin Franklin" on Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben\\_Franklin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Franklin).
2. Franklin, Benjamin. "Silence Dogood, No. 1," *The New-England Courant*, Boston, April 2, 1722. See also <http://www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf1/sd1.htm>.
3. Franklin, Benjamin. *Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written by an Old One*, The New-Printing-Office, Philadelphia, 1748. See also <http://www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf2/advice.htm>.
4. Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, 1999, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/>.
5. Franklin, Benjamin. "The Busy-Body, No. 1," *The American Weekly Mercury*, February 4, 1728. See <http://www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf2/bb1.htm>
6. For a more complete detailing of this incident, see Isaacson, Walter. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2003.
7. History of the United States Postal Service 1775-1993, <http://www.usps.com/history/history>.
8. Ibid.
9. Franklin, Benjamin. *Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One*, Washington, 1775.
10. Franklin, Benjamin. *Poor Richard's Almanack*, 9th edition, Philadelphia, 1742.

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## Notes

1. Benjamin Franklin understood his life as a state of constant change, even evident in the epitaph he crafted for himself at the age of 22, included here for the reader's pleasure:

The Body of  
B. Franklin, Printer;  
like the Cover of an old Book,  
Its Contents torn out,  
And stript of its Lettering and Gilding,  
Lies here, Food for Worms.  
But the Work shall not be wholly lost;  
For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more,  
In a new & more perfect Edition,  
Corrected and amended  
By the Author.

2. This text is also being distributed in other locations (in a format revised and amended by the Author.) At the time of printing, these included:

Dot Dot Dot 12, New York, 2006

Manifesta 6 School Library, Nicosia, Cyprus, 2006 (<http://www.manifesta6.org.cy/library.html>)

"Take One," Glassell School, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2006

The Internet Archive, search title "Post-Master"(<http://www.archive.org>)

O-R-G (<http://www.o-r-g.com/view.html?project=105>)

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