ADDISON AND STEELE promoted their Spectator persona as the model of disinterest: no wife, no job, no political party—nothing that could influence him to distort the truth, a la the typical news writer. Nonetheless, The Spectator was not immune from accusations of "falsehood." In a late issue of the periodical, one of his readers accuses him of "describing scenes of action or discourse in which he was never engaged" in order to profit from his readers’ credulity. After offering several rebuttals—among them the tautological claim that "any ordinary reader" can tell "what I deliver … as truth and what as fiction" (4.542: 209)—Addison concludes with this final, curious pitch to the overly skeptical readers who might still worry that his paper blurs the line between the two: “I desire my reader to consider every particular paper or discourse as a distinct tract by itself, and independent of everything that goes before or after it” (4.542: 208). Now, anyone who has read the Spectator would recognize this description as itself a fiction: Addison frequently serializes his topics—the pleasures of the imagination papers is the most obvious example—and often promises readers a continuation of a topic in subsequent issues. Why then deny it? But even if one takes seriously Addison’s claim that each issue constitutes “a distinct tract by itself,” how would this quell audience concerns over the effects of fiction masquerading as fact? Is narrative fraud only dangerous when it is perpetrated over the course of several issues?

The technique of seriality that is at issue in Addison’s defense of The Spectator was an expression of the period’s new sense of time, in which “durations regularly marked and transmuted into language accumulate in an unbroken, potentially open-ended series” (Stuart Sherman 8). As Lennard Davis and others...
have persuasively argued, the newspaper did much to naturalize this new sense of
time through its use of the “median past tense”—a “uniquely journalistic [tense]
implying that what one was reading had only a slightly deferred immediacy” and
that the events it described could, in fact, still be in process (73). By placing
readers in this ongoing present, Davis argues, the newspaper made them imagine
themselves as “participants in [the] external world” of political and economic
events (74). The ramifications of this epistemic shift have understandably lead
several scholars to privilege the newspaper’s contemporaneity over its content. For
example, historian Benedict Anderson has claimed that “the date at the top of the
newspaper [is] the single most important emblem on it” because it creates the
feeling of a shared progress through “homogeneous empty time,” which Anderson
argues was central to the development of “national consciousness” (33). J. Paul
Hunter, for whom this “nearly instant replay of human experience … helps create
the mindset that makes novels possible” (167), is also quite explicit about how the
implications of the newspaper’s sense of time supersede questions about its
content:

whether or not there was a real event or actual circumstances behind a particular
discussion ... whether the basis was entirely fictional, or whether facts were
embroidered towards fiction ... the stress on contemporaneity accelerated and
intensified the public sense that the present times were all that mattered. (177)

This formulation not only downplays readers’ concerns about the veracity of
newspapers; it also implies that “the stress on contemporaneity” can be understood
independently of them. By treating these two dimensions of newspaper experience
separately, I would argue that we are missing a crucial aspect of how eighteenth-
century culture perceived this new sense of time. Addison’s self-defense above
suggests that veracity did indeed “matter” to readers a great deal and that they
believed seriality played a prominent role in the newspaper’s capacity to deceive.
Indeed, Addison and Steele frequently decried seriality precisely because of its
ability to invest readers in stories that were likely fabricated, thereby making them
“participants” in fictional worlds that self-interested news writers constructed for
their own profit. By incessantly delaying the ends of their stories, these writers
could heighten the reader’s uneasy state of suspense to an irrational pitch in order
to make them hungry for new intelligence of any kind. Since Addison assumed
that the majority of news readers were members of the rising mercantile class, he
worried that the addiction to news fostered by news writers through seriality
would undermine their work ethic, thereby endangering the economic health of
the nation.

Addison and Steele were not the only writers to question the motives
behind seriality or to associate it with a potential decline in England’s mercantile
spirit. While Daniel Defoe was an active participant in the news industry, he was also one of the most vocal proponents of home trade. In his periodicals he frequently expressed concerns that the business of false intelligence threatened to “infect the morality of buying and selling” that he associated with a nation of honest shopkeepers, who he also worried might be attracted by the profitability of serialized news and the power that the intelligencer wielded over a public addicted to it (Master Mercury 4). In both The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Wild and Moll Flanders, Defoe dramatizes these concerns by depicting characters who are suited for honest trade but choose to become manufacturers of misinformation instead. The success of both depends upon their adeptness at serializing false intelligence, which enables them to gradually involve readers in fictional worlds that conduce to their own profit. While Wild’s fate was already written by history, Moll can still be rehabilitated and reinserted in the mercantile economy, a process that Defoe associates with a change in her narrative method, from seriality to abridgement. This aligns her with the virtuous editor, whose description of the novel comes surprisingly close to Addison’s distinct tract. By showing how Moll Flanders defines serialized news and novels according to competing narrative economies, I hope to complicate our assumptions about the historical relationship between those genres and to open up new possibilities for the role that news played in the novel’s rise to cultural legitimacy.

Hunter has called the novel “the dominant form of modern discourse” (167). There is no doubt that this genre played a significant role in eighteenth-century culture, but when one looks at the rapid growth of newspaper circulation over the course of the century, it is difficult not to give the newspaper the title that Hunter confers on its sibling. According to some estimates, in 1704, the press produced an average of 44,000 newspaper issues every week; by 1774, that number had grown to over 41,000 issues every day, largely because by this time dailies had superseded the weeklies that dominated the newspaper market in the early part of the century (Black 104). During the same period, novel sales were “slow and erratic” at best, vacillating between four and twenty new titles a year from 1700-1740 and between twenty and forty from 1740-1770 (Siskin 155). The immense popularity of printed intelligence stemmed from a perceived shift in its importance to the daily lives of its audience. As Lennard Davis has argued, news readers of the previous century did not regard the information contained in newspapers as its primary content; they read for “the moral beneath the details, not the details themselves” and were therefore ambivalent about the factuality of those details (68-9). However, once they began to regard themselves as participants in the political process—i.e., as a “public” in the Habermasian sense—and to see their economic lives as embedded in the larger network of global trade, they began to regard the details themselves as an operative force in their daily lives. As Jeremy
Black has noted, intelligence about domestic and international affairs “did not only affect statesmen and coffee-house politicians; the merchant scanning for information about privateers and the farmer eager for news of the effect of war on the corn trade, shared their concerns,” for such intelligence offered them insights into how they should conduct their daily business (26). When news became necessary at the most practical level, it ceased to be optional reading material, since it was one of the primary keys to material existence itself.

For the eighteenth-century reader, then, the rise of the newspaper constituted what Regis Debray has called a mediological revolution, which is characterized less by a change in the message than by new “processes of advance, diffusion and propagation” that enable “the world of signs” to operate on reality in unprecedented ways. Historicizing such a revolution for Debray is not chiefly “a matter of deciphering the world of signs but of understanding the ‘world becoming’ of signs …the ‘becoming-material’ forces of symbolic forms” (8). Newspapers were not shy about proclaiming their power over reality, as the following passage from The Reading Mercury attests:

The merchant, the artist, the mechanic have all recourse to newspapers; commerce is extended, the liberal sciences promoted; and all mutual intercourse in the ordinary connections of trade maintained and supported very principally by newspapers: offenders against the laws of their country are brought to justice, and the peace and welfare of individuals preserved entirely by newspapers. (qtd. in Black 59-60)

The anonymous writer of this passage endows the newspaper with a peculiar degree of agency by implying that it not only relates information about the world but also helps to produce and maintain it. Not all readers in the eighteenth century, however, were so sure that the cultural work performed by the newspaper was as disinterested as the above passage implies. After all, if newspapers could “extend commerce” and “promote” the credit of “public offices” or “great companies,” could they not also manipulate them for their own ends? And given the inaccessibility of the referent, how could readers tell if they were doing the one or the other? As Robert DeMaria puts it, newspaper readers were caught in an insoluble paradox: on the one hand, they turned to newspapers because the latter “made inspection of the hidden world … seem suddenly possible;” on the other hand, this “virtual participation” created a “continual concern with believability,” for the intelligence that they consumed might turn out to be a series of interested fictions (144-5). Newspaper critics worried that, by accepting the latter as true, readers became the principle characters in those fictions and unknowingly served the aims of their author by acting out his false intelligence in their daily lives.
According to anti-newspaper discourse, seriality was one of the primary means by which news writers encouraged readers to inhabit their stories. The tendency among critics has been to align this new sense of time with both a more ordered perception of reality and a more disciplined approach to its interpretation. Hunter, for example, associates the newspaper’s “virtue[s] of predictability and continuity” with the rationalistic “desire to interpret by accumulation” (176, 178). Such progressivist rhetoric perhaps describes our own experience of seriality, but in the early eighteenth century, the predictability and continuity of newspapers were not unequivocally regarded as “virtues” nor were they associated with rational interpretation. Instead, anti-newspaper discourse complained that seriality involved readers in a perpetual state of suspense that produced the irrational desire for news of any kind. While Erin Mackie has rightly noted how Addison and Steele associate this “addiction” with the speed of news (219-20), they were just as skeptical about its slowness. They frequently accuse news writers of fomenting the desire for news by intentionally littering their intelligence with “broken hints” and then telling readers that they will be resolved in a subsequent issue (Tatler 155: 304). The newspaper, then, did not necessarily concentrate readers’ attention on the present—the “urgent sense of now” that Hunter associates with it (177)—but left them “languishing” in the not-yet-present:

We long to receive further particulars, to hear what will be the next step, or what will be the consequences of that which has been already taken. A westerly wind keeps the whole town in suspense, and puts a stop to conversation … In short the mind is … kept in a perpetual gape after knowledge [and] punished with that eternal thirst, which is the portion of all our modern news-mongers. (Spectator 3.452: 396)

By always deferring interpretation to the next issue, then, the newspaper promotes a kind of jouissance of reading: the audience “long to receive further particulars” that can fill an informational lack, only to find that the wholeness they long for is always deferred, since whatever particulars arrive fill one gap only to create another. To Addison, this series of “perpetual” deferrals makes the public indifferent to the reliability of the information that they read, so long as it satisfies their desire for the “next step” in the story.

To Richard Steele, this unhealthy obsession with serialized news produces a kind of “delirium” in newsmongers, who become so involved in the developing narrative that they begin to live entirely in the world that news creates for them:

My contemporaries the Novelists have, for the better spinning out Paragraphs, and, working down to the end of their Columns, a most happy Art in saying and unsaying, giving hints of Intelligence, and Interpretations of indifferent Actions, to the great disturbance of the Brains of ordinary Readers … [News writers] keep
up imaginary entertainments in empty heads, and produce neglect of their own affairs, poverty, and bankruptcy ... What I am now warning the people of is, that the News-Papers of this Island are as pernicious to weak Heads in England as ever Books of Chivalry to Spain. (Tatler 178: 339)

For Steele, then, the intelligencer’s “art of saying and unsaying” and of “giving hints” without resolving them produces an effect akin to the romance, which was likewise criticized for encouraging readers to act out the fictions that they read. The financial gains of the news-writer were predicated on this ability to keep their readers fighting windmills of their own creation: “a half a dozen men live very plentifully upon this Curiosity in their fellow Subjects” (Spectator 3.452: 395). For this reason, the intelligencer’s craft was often compared with other shady ways of making money, such as the frauds practiced by sharers and stock-jobbers, whose profits also depended on their ability to get readers to invest in narratives that were “verifiable only with time” (Sandra Sherman 5). Addison invokes the fraudulent practices of “Change Alley” when he bemoans that readers will credit any news so long as it “affords great matter for Speculation” (Tatler 155: 304). The term “Speculation” is, of course, a double entendre that implies both interpretation and risky financial investment. By partaking in the world of serialized news, then, readers were investing in a bubble that expands one day, and one detail, at a time until it inevitably bursts.

And, for Addison, readers were indeed taking serious financial risks when they devoted their time to news reading—risks that threatened the economic prosperity of a nation of merchants and shopkeepers. In The Complete English Tradesman, Defoe places a great deal of emphasis on the amount of time the tradesman should spend in his shop: “nothing but what are called the necessary duties of life are to intervene; and even these are to be limited so as to not interfere with business” (39). Consequently, the tradesman must learn to discriminate between a proper and improper diversion based upon “the time it takes; for if the man spends the time in it which should be spent in his shop or warehouse … the diversion so taken becomes criminal” (75). To Addison, who likewise seems to endorse this protestant work ethic, reading serialized news constitutes just such a criminal diversion, for the suspense that it produces causes readers to “neglect … their affairs” on a daily basis—a sin of omission that he links with “poverty” and “bankruptcy.” Addison underscores this connection in an earlier issue of the Tatler, where he recounts a story of an upholsterer who becomes addicted to news as a representative example of the many “worthy citizens who live more in the Coffee-house than in their shops, and whose thoughts are so taken up” with the stories of the press that “they forget their customers.” This “indefatigable kind of Life was the Ruin of his Shop,” as it is the demise of so many other businesses in London (155: 304). To Addison, then, news reading threatened to undermine the
economic prosperity that so famously moved him on his visit to the Royal Exchange.

As early eighteenth-century England’s most vocal proponent and theorist of mercantilism and arguably its most prolific journalist and media theorist, Defoe had one foot in each of these enterprises. While literary critics have lavished attention on his opinions about trade, they have devoted much less to his position on journalism, nor have they explored the relationship between the two. In his two periodicals, *The Review* and *The Master-Mercury*, Defoe repeatedly argues that the proliferation of newspapers has made intelligence “the most Grievous, most Exquisite, and most Perverted piece of Art at this time,” for it threatens to “spread [Fictions] over this Nation” until the latter rests on a “Foundation of Forgery” (*Review* 2.106: 423, 422). Like Addison, he associates the growth of the news industry with a decline in the mercantile economy. However, he was less concerned with the time the public devoted to reading that intelligence than he was with the possibility that potential merchants would be attracted to the profits of the news industry and decide to turn intelligencers themselves. After all, it required no outlay of capital—nothing more than a good “stock of words,” Defoe says—and it was capable of generating an insatiable market eager to consume anything it produced. In his *Review*, Defoe satirically puts the problem as follows:

In the decay of trade, occasioned by the war, lying is taken up as a new manufacture … and as we were very good at improving before, we are in a fair way now to be esteemed as good at inventing. In a few years more there is no doubt but this new manufacture may arrive to greater perfection [than the old] and may be fit for exportation. (*Review* 8.207: 832).

In the pages that follow, I would like to argue that Defoe’s later work echoes this concern that “improving” manufactures were ceding ground to the “new manufacture” of “inventing.” Defoe appropriately chooses the criminal biography as his vehicle for satirizing an industry that he regarded as a perversion of honest trade. By associating the terminology of news with their protagonists’ criminal exploits, both his *Life and Adventures of Jonathan Wild* and *Moll Flanders* attempt to persuade the reader of the negative economic and epistemological consequences of this shift in the economic base. At the center of this critique is the figure of seriality, which Defoe uses to illustrate both the dangerous proliferation of news and how its writers manipulate their audience for personal gain.

Jonathan Wild was the perfect figure for satirizing information culture because his crimes actually made use of newspapers themselves. Rather than robbing people directly, Wild would gather “intelligence” from other thieves concerning their crimes—“where the robbery was committed and whose goods they were”—and then publish a story in the newspaper to the effect that he had
recovered the stolen goods and would arrange for the owner to reclaim them, a
good deed for which he hoped to be well rewarded (236). While the stolen goods
lay concealed in the back room of his shop, Wild concocted elaborate scenarios for
their retrieval, complete with plot and character, which he doled out to the victim
in a serialized form akin to the development of a newspaper story from issue to
issue. If you visited his shop, Defoe says, you would be treated to the following
entertainment:

[First] you were asked some needful questions, that is to say needful not for his
information, but for your amusement … And your answers to them all were
minuted down, as if in order to make a proper search and enquiry, whereas
perhaps the very thing you came to enquire after was in the very room where you
were, or not far off. After all this grimace was at an end, you were desired to call
again, or send in a day or two, and then you should know whether he was able to
do you any service or no, and so you were dismissed. At your second coming, you
had some encouragement given to you, that you would be served, but perhaps the
terms were a little raised upon you, and you were told the rogue that had it was
impudent … ‘However,’ says Jonathan, ‘if I can but come to the speech of him, I’ll
make him be more reasonable.’ The next time he tells you, that all he can bring
the rogue to is that --- guineas be paid to the porter who shall bring the goods,
and a promise that nothing should be said to him, but just take and give; the gold
watch, or the snuff box, or whatever it is, shall be brought to you by such a time
exactly; and thus upon mutual assurances the bargain is made for restoring the
goods. (243-44)

This serialization of the narrative in carefully constructed installments, all of which
contribute to maintaining the suspense and enhancing the “amusement” of the
tale, increases the monetary value of the story as it unfolds, from the initial
“retainer” of a Crown for the first installment to the “handsome” reward that Wild
receives at the end (243, 244). The victim is disposed to pay this reward largely
because the constant deferrals and proliferating details of Wild’s story pile up to
create a convincing reality effect that makes the reader willingly enter this fictional
world and act out the part he is assigned. However, during every twist and turn of
Wild’s narrative, the actual referent is literally just out of sight.

This scheme was so successful that eventually “his house became an office
of intelligence for enquiries of that kind,” which Wild runs in the spirit of an
honest tradesman (237). Defoe describes him as a “man of business” and a
“perfect master of his trade,” who “openly kept his compting-house, or office
…and had his books to enter everything in with the utmost exactness and
regularity.” By attributing to Wild the same titles and practices as an actual
shopkeeper, Defoe suggests that the economy of “intelligence” in which he
participates is not just supplanting trade but making a mockery of it (243). But
Wild’s savvy business practices, especially his book-keeping (so near and dear to Defoe’s heart), also suggest that he could have been the epitome of the complete English tradesman. Instead, he chose to manufacture and retail intelligence, using the mechanism of seriality to both mask his ruse and maximize his profits. It is choosing this new, sham manufacture over honest trade that constitutes Wild’s principle crime.

Moll Flanders is punished for making the same choice, as she abandons dress mending for the more profitable business of spinning yarns invented out of whole cloth. This shift begins to occur as soon as the story-telling Moll is “put to nurse” with a woman who earns her living by maintaining such charges until they are old enough “to go to service, or get their own bread.” From this “sober pious Woman,” Moll is educated to be an artisan in the wool manufacture, the “chief Trade of that City” and the one that, for Defoe, is most central to England’s economic prosperity. But before she is old enough to enter the trade, she is ordered to go to service by the magistrates, news that puts her “into a great fright.” She begs her nurse to keep her, promising to “Work very hard” to earn her living by her needle (46). However, it is not hard work that ultimately saves Moll from the drudgeries of servitude; it is her entertaining account of what it means to be a gentlewoman—the first of many stories that Moll will deploy in lieu of money. Amused with this relation, the nurse relays “my story” to the mayor who was likewise “so pleas’d with it” that he agrees to flout parish policy in regard to the poor and let Moll remain with her nurse (48-9).

The benefits that accrue to Moll from this story do not stop with her reprieve from servitude. The story becomes a commodity in its own right—a seemingly limitless one—that circulates amongst the public, attracting more and more readers, who hunger for additions to it, until it ultimately replaces Moll’s material productions as her most valuable source of income. The first person to visit Moll is the mayor’s wife, who examines Moll’s “Work” and converses with her about it, before expressing how pleased she is with the gentlewoman story. Then, “giving me my work again, she put her Hand in her Pocket [and] gave me a Shilling” (49). The two economies—the manufacture of goods and the manufacture of information—are here placed in competition with one another, and the productions of the latter seem more valuable to the consumer, who purchases the story and returns the handiwork. The mayor’s wife is succeeded by her daughters, who don’t even make a pretence of being interested in Moll’s material labor but come solely for the story of the gentlewoman, for which alone they are willing to pay: “they talked a long while to me, and I answer’d them in my Innocent way … [T]hey were pleased to be familiar with me, and lik’d my little prattle to them, which it seems was agreeable enough to them, and they gave me money too” (50). As these ladies bring “others with them,” and those others still, the market for the story steadily increases until all the “Ladies of the Town”
clamor at her door to pay for more “prattle.” Consequently, by the time she is
called again to service, her two employments have produced such a fortune that “it
was plain I could maintain myself” (52).

This shift in Moll’s condition, the novel implies, corresponds to a shift in
the economic base, from labor capital to information capital. While a piece of
clothing can be converted into money only once, a single story can be sold and
resold day after day to a seemingly endless market. However, this isn’t even the
greatest source of Moll’s profit, which lies in her story’s ability to remake reality in
its own image simply by being repeated over a series of installments. While Moll’s
initial visitors laugh at her naive pretensions to gentlewoman status, they slowly
begin to conform their behavior to those pretensions. Moll herself is shocked
when the mayoress starts to call her “Miss,” just as if she were a real gentlewoman,
since “the word Miss was a Language that had hardly been heard of in our [parish]
School” (49). Hence, what began as the naive fancy of a little girl has, through
narrative accumulation, gradually transformed into an unquestionable fact.
Ironically, while Moll proves “willing to be a servant” when her nurse dies, the
ladies of the town, who now regard her as a “poor gentlewoman” (54), can no
longer think of it and vie for the privilege of adopting her (55). Thus, Moll’s story
has made her market, as the saying goes, transforming a poor parish charge in rags
into “a gentlewoman indeed” (52), with a fashionable education and “the
Reputation of living in a very good Family” (57).

The novel is rife with such episodes, in which the adult Moll metes out
stories in a series of installments that ultimately bring into being the world they
describe, both because the gradual accumulation of detail produces a convincing
reality effect and because the newsmongers to which it caters are ambivalent about
the truth of the information they consume. In her first adult foray into the
information market, for example, she takes advantage of the local passion for news
to damage the reputation of a friend’s suitor, thereby removing his other marriage
options: “She should take care to have it well spread … which she could not fail of
an opportunity to do in a Neighborhood so addicted to news, as that she lived in
was, that she had inquired into his circumstances and found he was not the Man
as to Estate he pretended to be.” Like Addison’s newspaper readers, Moll’s public
is “addicted to news” and therefore values the pleasure of news over its validity.
Moll proves that she knows how to enhance this pleasure through the device of
seriality, as she supplements the original story each day with a new “piece of secret
intelligence,” thereby keeping the story alive in the public imagination while at the
same time indulging the audience’s passion for suspense. First she “added, as what
the other Gossips knew nothing of (viz.) That I heard he was in very bad
Circumstances;” then she “added … that I had heard a Rumor too, that he had a
Wife alive at Plymouth, and another in the West Indies, a thing which [the
public] knew was not very uncommon for such kind of Gentlemen” (115; Defoe’s
emphasis). None of these details are true, of course; however, each is the newest of the new (even to “other gossips”) and that seems to be enough to legitimate its value, since that is all that is required to feed their addiction.

This addiction seems to spread with each new piece of intelligence, as the audience for it expands from issue to issue until the story becomes a full-blown media event. It not only became “the Chat of the Tea Table all over that part of the Town” but even crossed the Thames and “went over to Radcliff,” where the suitor finds his “good Name was much the same … as it was on our side” of the water (115, 116). In the end, the only way that he can regain that good name is by marrying Moll’s friend on her own terms. Hence, starting with only a single piece of “secret intelligence” and “a few gossips” to circulate it, Moll’s repeated additions to that story succeed in turning all of London into a collective “Instrument” for accomplishing her scheme (115). No matter where the captain tries to reestablish his “good Name,” he finds that Moll’s fictions of intelligence have already written his character for him, which has become more real to the community than reality itself—so real, in fact, that even Moll’s companion “almost began to believe that all was true … tho’ at the same time she knew that she had been the raiser [i.e., circulator] of those reports herself” (117). In the end, as the author of this intelligence, Moll is the only one immune to its convincing reality effect.

While in her future adventures, Moll does not employ news readers per se, she does continue to take advantage of the practice of seriality to both heighten her suitor’s/reader’s desire, to give her invented history an aura of authenticity, and, most importantly, to increase the final payoff. Her affair with a sober banker proves that this can happen with the most pragmatic of readers. Instead of taking his first offer, Moll “put[s] him off: I told him he knew little of me, and bade him enquire” (195). Of course, she has already secured herself against such inquiries by circulating a series of reports about herself as a “very modest sober body” with a good “character”—news that her public will then relay to the banker, thereby once again serving as unwitting agents in Moll’s intelligence scheme. Through these piecemeal reports and occasional letters, Moll “play[s] with this lover as an angler does with a trout,” tempting him with the denouement only to put it off in lieu of one more inquiry, one more piece of intelligence. This incessant deferral of narrative consummation ultimately raises his desire for Moll to such a fever pitch that he “must not be denied” (243), and laying before Moll a “Bundle of Papers” that represent the sum total of his fortune, he begs her to take him for everything he is worth (241). While this would seem to suggest a desire for closure, we must remember that Moll herself is nothing but a collection of accounts. Hence, marrying Moll is equivalent not to a desire for closure but for perpetual disclosure.

This interplay between seriality, sexual desire, and monetary gain is perhaps most explicit in Moll’s affair with the gentleman lodger. In this affair, as in others, Moll employs a publisher (her landlady) to “encourag[e] the Correspondence” by
circulating an alluring piece of fictional intelligence—in this case, a moving account of her financial hardships, which she hopes will prompt the gentleman to offer “some Gratification” in return for her story. However, when he “began to inquire a little into my Circumstances,” (160), she pretends to be “backward” to tell him or to accept the money because she realizes that the longer she withholds her circumstances, the more her audience’s desire to hear them will increase and the more he will be willing to pay for them (161). Consequently, as with the banker, she refuses to give her history all at once, choosing instead to dole out this information gradually. Becoming increasingly frustrated with the pace of Moll’s plot and eager for her share of the payoff, the landlady tries to force the affair to a speedy conclusion with a “Story of her own inventing,” this time one that “bluntly” reveals all of Moll’s circumstances at once. Moll does not “like her Project” because the landlady’s story lacks the “subtlety” of her own inventions and therefore its motive is too obvious: “it look’d too much like prompting him” (162). Indeed, the gentleman himself “seem’d distasted a little at [the landlady] talking as she did,” despite his frequent complaints that Moll would not trust him with the whole of her story. However, when Moll resumes control over her narrative (ironically, by taking the landlady “up short”), her lover “came immediately to himself again,” apparently satisfied that their game would continue as it had before (162). Thus, despite his complaints that Moll is “backward to trust him with the Secret of my Circumstances,” he realizes that this backwardness is essential to the delight that he takes in her relation (161). Like Addison’s newsmonger, the gentleman’s pleasure in Moll’s intelligence depends on the delays that force him to “languish in expectation.” His protests to the contrary notwithstanding, it proves to be the continuation of the story, not the “secret” towards which it tends, that he truly desires.

Moll’s later career as a thief, while it might seem to indicate a transition from words to things, in truth only repeats the information dynamic we have seen above. Here, Moll literalizes the metaphor that Defoe frequently used to describe the self-interested news writer, who he complained “pick’d our pockets” by retailing false intelligence as truth (*Master Mercury* 1). The success of her robberies, no less than the success of her marriages, depends upon her ability to gather intelligence and then use it to create plausible fictions that she constructs through the accumulation of circumstantial detail. One example should suffice here. When she sees a “little Miss” walking about the Mall with “a fine gold watch on, and a necklace of Pearl,” rather than attempt to lift the watch immediately, she accosts the little girl’s footman to gather intelligence about her intended victim (330): “The Fool of a Fellow told me presently who she was … that she was a great Fortune, that her mother was not come to town yet; but she was with Sir William —’s Lady of Suffolk, at her Lodgings in Suffolk Street, and a great deal more” (330-1). This interview provides Moll with the information
capital that she needs to conduct her “business,” and she uses the “abundance” of
details that the footman gives her to construct a probable identity that will put her
“in a Rank with this young Lady.” When she catches up with the latter, Moll is
able to “salute her by her Name” and ask after her parents. She then begins a
conversation about the family that is composed of so many particulars that Lady
Betty cannot but believe it:

I talk’d so familiarly to her of her whole Family that she cou’d not suspect but that I
knew them all intimately: I ask’d her why she would come abroad without Mrs. Chime
with her (that was the Name of her Woman) to take care of Mrs. Judith
that was her Sister. Then I enter’d into a long chat with her about her Sister, what a fine little Lady she was, and ask’d if she had learned French, and a Thousand such little things to entertain her.

Once again, we have a story that develops over the course of a “thousand” little
additions (“Then I...”), which serve as the capital that Moll invests to gain the
trust of her audience, who, like all of Moll’s readers, seems predisposed to accept
as true any narrative that is equally circumstantial and “entertaining” (331).

The success of such fictions depends upon Moll’s monopoly on the business of false intelligence, for she can manipulate reality only so long as she can distinguish what is real herself. However, as Defoe points out in his Review, this “new manufacture” is a growth industry, and as more people begin to pursue its profits, the number of stories in circulation will make it increasingly difficult for anyone, even information producers, to distinguish truth from falsehood and hence to remain outside of the fictional worlds that such intelligence produces. What seems like an exchange of story for material wealth can turn out to be an exchange of one story for another—a scenario that is inevitable once the world becomes entirely mediated. Moll’s affair with Jemmy is a case in point. When Moll’s fictional intelligence that she is a “Widow Lady of Great Fortune” meets
with a return that appears “sincere” and “undissembled,” she assumes that she
holds a monopoly on misinformation and is therefore impervious to narrative manipulation herself: “one would think I could not have been cheated, and indeed I thought so myself” (196). Hence, when she is introduced to an Irishman who is reported to have “1500 £ a year,” she is quick to credit that information, largely because of the manner in which it is related: he “talk’d as naturally of his Park and Stables, of his Horses, his Game-Keepers, his Woods, his Tenants, and his Servants, as if we had been in the Mansion-House, and I had seen them all about me” (198-99). We are to understand that these circumstances are not offered at once but that new details are “represent[ed] every hour to [Moll’s] imagination” until their gradual accumulation makes the whole seem “natural” to Moll, who inhabits it like Addison’s news readers do a battle on foreign shores (“as if ... I had
seen them all about me”). Hence, while Moll is an excellent information producer, as a consumer, she is no more immune to tilting at windmills than the many victims of her own fictional intelligence. Of course, neither is Jemmy, who also builds his scheme on “no other Authority than a hear-say” (204). The result of this mutual deception is a marriage between fictions that is as incestual in its own way as Moll’s marriage with her brother. Certainly, this unnatural relation between stories is equally unprofitable. The episode thus illustrates that, once the market becomes based on a “foundation of forgery,” even the forgers themselves cannot tell the difference between credulous audiences and devious authors, intelligible facts and fictional intelligence.

In episodes like this one, *Moll Flanders* suggests that a shift in the economic base from the old manufacture of material goods to the “new manufacture” of information results in what Walter Benjamin has called the “decay of the aura,” which occurs when the original is replaced by an endless stream of representations (223). Moll herself figures this loss of aura, as her trade in information reduces her to a copy of an absent original (we don’t even know her real name, only the fake name that is itself a piece of information coined by someone else). To have Moll apprehended by her fellow intelligencers would only compound this problem, since it would further depreciate the aura by simply replicating her economy of information one more time. The only means of correcting the problem is therefore to trap Moll in a place where language has no capital—a Swiftian world in which things speak for themselves.

For Defoe, this is the world of the tradesman’s shop. Moll is ultimately apprehended not by her fellow intelligencers but by “two wenches” who run a shop “that sold goods for the weavers to the mercers.” The shop is therefore one of those “improving manufactures” that Defoe contrasts with the business of “inventing” in his *Review*; its primary purpose is to act as a mediator, or “factor,” between two stages in the production of a specific commodity: a dress (347). It is important to remember here that clothing is Defoe’s primary example of the benefits of circulation in the *Review*: “I will make it appear that from the first principles of the clothes to my wearing them, 100 families have a part of their subsistence out of this one suit of clothes as the things are handed on in the course of trade, and as they circulate from one place to another.” Among these “families” are the “factors” that facilitate the circulation of raw materials and enable them to become “waistcoats, breeches, pockets, and such” (*Best of* 143). Hence, in this world, mediation is a material process; instead of transforming things into words, it transforms things into other things.

Consequently, Moll finds that, once she passes over the “threshold” that separates her economy of “inventing” from this economy of “improving,” her primary form of capital ceases to have any value:
On the one hand, the wenches are depicted as utterly without language, at least the kind of language that Moll can understand. They initially approach her “open-mouthed” but nothing seems to come out, and when they finally do speak, their words reach Moll as only so many inarticulate “roars” (348). The scene thus illustrates how far Moll—herself a dressmaker at the beginning of the story—has become alienated from the language of trade. On the other hand, Moll finds that once she has crossed the “threshold” that marks off the economy of intelligence from the economy of trade, her own language ceases to function as capital. The “Room” of the shop provides “no room” for Moll’s own “good words,” which are utterly without value in a space where “eloquence” gives way to “plain dealing”—a transparent and economical mode of communication that Moll later admits is “very harsh” to her ears (359). Nonetheless, she is forced to succumb to it, a fact illustrated by a telling shift in her method of storytelling. Trapped in a world where there is no room for her narrative to serve as a form of currency, Moll decides to “make short” her story, thereby becoming nearly as economical in her use of language as her captors.

The ability of these tradespeople to resist Moll’s “good words” thus inaugurates a process of reform that is akin to editing, as Moll is forced to trim her prolix story down to the bare essentials. Whenever she attempts to regain her power over language, such as when she tries to manipulate the judge or the priest through her “moving tone,” she finds herself struck “dumb and silent” (369), with “no tongue to speak” (363) and therefore “nothing to say” (366). Divested of her powers of invention, she can only force out “an abridgement of this whole history,” an edited version of the novel that lacks the colorings of fiction that had previously enabled her to control her audience (366). Moll herself admits that this episode of her tale is very “wide from the business of this book” as it has been previously conducted. As we have seen, that business consisted of dilating each piece of intelligence until it subsumed the world to which it ostensibly referred. The practice of abridgement, which does not allow for the proliferation of language, is therefore “inconsistent” with such business and marks Moll’s break from it (368).

Once she learns to accept this edited version of her life, in which language is reduced to a transparent medium of communication, she is sufficiently rehabilitated to reenter the world of trade. Fittingly, Moll’s rehabilitation culminates in her return to America, a place where the transparency of signs, which are grafted onto the human bodies to which they refer, makes the business of inventing impossible. As Stephen Michael has noted, Defoe represents America
in the novel as an economy that wholly rejects “language … as a form of operating
capital,” replacing it with the material goods sold by “tradesmen and merchants,”
as is evident from the following description of the transported felons’ economic
progress in America (388):

> they have encouragement given them to plant for themselves; for they have a
certain number of Acres of Land allotted them by the country, and they go to
work to Clear and Cure the land, and then to plant it with tobacco and corn for
their own use; and as the Tradesmen and Merchants will trust them with Tools,
and Cloths, and other Necessaries, upon the credit of their Crop … so they again
plant every year a little more than the year before, and so buy whatever they want
with the crop that is before them. Hence … many a Newgate Bird becomes a
great man. (134)

These tradesmen stand at the center of the improving manufacture that is
America, which produces both better goods and better men. But this process of
improvement is based on the tradesmen’s ability to “trust” one another upon
“credit,” which is possible only in a world where the inventive power of language
cannot pervert the reciprocal exchange of goods that Moll’s mother describes here.
Perhaps this is why everyone has been “burnt in the hand,” which fixes identity
and thereby prevents its manipulation through language (134). By abridging the
power of the latter, Defoe is able to reverse the shift in the economic base that he
bemoaned in *The Review*, as Moll finally puts her “mercantilist talents to work” in
the service of an improving rather than an inventing manufacture, thereby
“implicat[ing] herself in the right ideology” (Michael 388).

But the self-abridgement of Moll’s story that inaugurates her reform is not
just indicative of the shift from an economy of information to an economy of
goods; it also serves to legitimate Defoe’s narrative practices and to differentiate
them from the intelligencer’s abuse of language. The role of Defoe’s editor is not
to invent Moll’s story, for “the author is here suppos’d to be writing her own
history,” but to “new dress” it by excising those sections that do not “speak
language fit to be read” (37). In other words, the novelist follows the same
ideology of improvement that Moll adopts by the end of the novel, as is illustrated
by Defoe’s incessant emphasis on the labor of writing: “The pen employ’d in
finishing her Story, and making it what you see it to be, has had no little difficulty
to put it into a dress to be seen … An author must be hard put to it to wrap it up
so clean” (37–8; my italics). Defoe’s emphasis on dress-making recalls both Moll’s
original profession as a dress mender and the scene of her final capture, a shop that
facilitates the making of dresses, while his method recalls how Moll “makes short”
her story until it becomes a concise “abridgement of my whole history.” While the
intelligencer ceaselessly generates stories until they reshape the world they
describe, the novelist trims away their excess fabric: “to this purpose some of the
vicious part of her life … is quite left out, and several other parts are very much shortened” (38). He also leaves out other stories—the histories of Mother Midnight and Jemmy—that would make the novel “too long” (41). Defoe, then, implies that the novel is a trustworthy medium precisely because its writer does not seek to suspend readers in a fictional world-in-process by gradually amassing detail upon detail; instead, he labors to trim it down to only those “parts” from which “something may be learned” (40).

Just as he makes the practice of abridgement central to Moll’s reform, Defoe also encourages the reader to adopt the editorial practices that the narrator is modeling for him or her. The work will only be valuable to those “who know how to read it,” and Defoe implies that this proper reading strategy consists of ignoring the story as a whole and instead concentrating on the “parts, which to a just discernment will appear to have more real beauty in them than all the amorous chain of story” put together (38, 39). The good reader, in other words, will replicate the editorial practices of the novelist; rather than focusing on the “amorous chain of story”—a mistake made by all of Moll’s victims—he will edit it so that only those “parts” that “preserve the most solemn resolutions of virtue” will remain (39). He will, in other words, learn to regard the practice of novel reading as serious “business” that participates in the economy of improvement that the novel champions by its close.

I must certainly qualify any larger claims about genre from this argument, for any such claims would be subject to the fallacy of hasty generalization. However, I do want to suggest that the epistemology of serialized narrative that I have traced here might warrant a reexamination of the place of news in the rise of the novel. While scholars have devoted a good deal of attention to “contemporaneity” in newspapers and novels, they have rarely treated the two genres as themselves contemporaneous. Despite the fact that “the newspaper and the novel grew up together” (Campbell 253), scholars have largely represented their relationship as a paternal rather than a fraternal one. Both Davis and Hunter, for example, focus their analyses on how seventeenth-century news discourse “helps create the mind that makes novels possible” (Hunter 167), before turning their attention to eighteenth-century novels themselves as “inheritors” of this discourse (Davis 101). The consequence is that the history of the newspaper virtually ends when the history of the novel begins, when, in fact, both genres were struggling to achieve cultural legitimacy at the same time. William Warner has noted that the early novel was subject to concerns that its “beguiling but morally irresponsible representations could seduce the spectator or reader into an unconscious emulation—into, in Blake’s succinct formulation, ‘becoming what they beheld’” (129). As we have seen, similar concerns typified anti-newspaper discourse as well and, I would argue, to a larger degree, given that news reading was both more pervasive and more central to the practices of everyday life than was
novel reading. Hence, one way that novelists could combat concerns over the effect of their own “irresponsible representations” was to displace that effect onto the more disreputable genre of news. This is arguably what Defoe achieves in *Moll Flanders* when he opposes intelligence and the novel according to competing narrative economies. Indeed, by presenting the novel as a corrective to the newspaper’s self-interested manipulation of seriality, Defoe attempts to legitimate its cultural value as a more disinterested, and therefore trustworthy, medium.

Indiana University South Bend
Works Cited


