

Daniel Defoe's Pioneering Consumer Journalism in the *Review*

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Most people who today recognise the name Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) know him as the creator of that great fictional character Robinson Crusoe. But Defoe's genius is not confined to his classic tale of the castaway or to his other creations of long fiction, such as *Moll Flanders* or *Roxanna*. Defoe was one of the great pioneering journalists and this paper considers his trailblazing contribution to the world of consumer journalism.

Consumer journalism is defined here as any text made available to the general public on current issues affecting consumers. Consumer journalism is conventionally regarded as having been invented in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century.¹ Certainly, what we now recognise as modern consumer journalism did originate with books such as Chase and Schlink's *Your Money's Worth* (1927) and magazines such as *Consumer Reports*, which began publishing in 1936. *Consumer Reports* is now an American institution, with a circulation of four million.² Consumer journalism has developed a massive international presence, and in the United Kingdom magazines such as *Which?* and television programmes such as *Watchdog* enjoy enormous popularity.

However, consumer journalism did not emerge fully formed in the twentieth century. This paper will demonstrate that Defoe was writing on consumer matters many years before in his journal, the *Review*. Of course, Defoe's pioneering consumer work is not the same as his modern-day descendants. He did not, for instance, comprehensively review products for his readers, nor did he spend much time scrupulously investigating the matters he raised before rushing into print. Indeed, his approach to consumer journalism reflected the relaxed attitudes towards truth so common in the journalism of his time. Nevertheless, the essential characteristics of his consumer journalism are often found today in the pages of magazines such as *Which?* and *Consumer Reports*. For instance, as with the modern consumer journalist, Defoe criticises sharp mercantile practices and monopolies, pillories scamsters, and offers advice on public health and personal health matters. Further, many of the techniques of the modern consumer journalist can be detected in his writing, including humour, the case-study, letters to the editor column (in which he offers consumer advice to his correspondents), and the criticising of traditional enemies of the consumer, such as trades people, lawyers, financiers, and other professionals. Indeed, some of his techniques were remarkably prescient.

He reprinted and mocked typographical and other ludicrous errors in the newspapers, much as the popular 'Selling It: Goofs, Glitches and Gotchas' section in *Consumer Reports* reprints similar ludicrous errors today. A study of Defoe's consumer journalism therefore represents an opportunity to analyse closely one aspect of his pioneering work in a field of journalism that now commands a gigantic audience.

This paper does not argue that Defoe was the sole pioneer of consumer journalism. Indeed, Charles Dickens' journal, *Household Words*, contains examples of prototypical consumer journalism.³ Space precludes this paper from considering whether any of Defoe's journalistic contemporaries were also writing on such matters, although it is noted that the newspapers of the time confined themselves to reporting general news, and the two journalists frequently cited as his major peers, Addison and Steele, preferred to write on social and literary instruction.⁴ If this paper stimulates further research pushing back the origins of consumer journalism, that outcome would be welcomed.

Defoe wrote on myriad topics in the *Review*, with consumer journalism representing only a small part of his massive output in the journal. Nevertheless, the gusto with which he wrote this material suggests it is a topic he was greatly interested in. Further, his consumer journalism proved highly appealing to his readers, enabling us to better understand their daily concerns.⁵ This paper provides the historical background to Defoe's *Review*, considers what Defoe's reasons for writing consumer journalism might have been, and critically analyses some examples of consumer journalism found in the *Review*.

The first newspapers to be published in England were the irregularly published *corrantos*, single-sheet papers filled with foreign news that appeared in the early part of the seventeenth century. The first regular newspapers soon followed. For most of this period, the press was heavily controlled by the government, with a brief period of relative press freedom during the turmoil of the English Civil War. The end of the war saw the return of state control and censorship. Direct government control was eventually removed, and by early in the eighteenth century there was comparative freedom for the range of newspapers that existed. Nevertheless, the government sought to use taxation to impede the press and to use the press to influence public opinion by subsidising journalists to produce propaganda in their publications.

Prior to writing the *Review*, Defoe had worked as a middleman, buying and selling a variety of goods, including hosiery, perfumes and timber, and had also run a brick and tile manufacturing business. But his business acumen was less than ideal. This, plus some bad luck, led him into bankruptcy in 1692. The brick and tile manufacturing business he subsequently established was gradually rebuilding his business fortunes and repaying his debts when he published *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), a pamphlet that was misinterpreted by many, and saw him convicted for seditious libel, imprisoned

in Newgate prison and pilloried. He remained in prison until November 1703, and his incarceration resulted in the collapse of his manufacturing business.

Even at this low ebb, Defoe's seemingly indefatigable energy saw him rebound. He began the *Review* very soon after his release, and it quickly became a success. The journal's initial readership is estimated to have been 2000 to 4000, and was designed to appeal to the urban middle class, especially those in London, with one contemporary commenting that the *Review* was 'the Entertainment of most Coffee houses in Town'.⁶ Written virtually single-handedly by Defoe, the *Review* existed for nearly ten years. The first edition came out on 19 February 1704 and the last on 11 June 1713. Originally appearing weekly, its popularity eventually saw the *Review* published three times a week. Approximately once a year, he would repackage and reissue the individual issues of the *Review* in volumes.⁷

Defoe insisted that the *Review* was unbiased and truthful. On the first page of his journal, he proclaimed that the journal was 'Purg'd from the Errors and Partiality of News-Writers, and Petty-Statesmen'. He later assured his readers that, as author of the *Review*, 'his Pen is lifted in the Service of Truth; and as there shall be nothing but Truth, as near as he is able, in his Paper, so no Truth shall be so plain, so great, or so Terrible, but he will Dare to speak it'. He also assured his readers that he would speak 'without Partiality, Prejudice, Passion or Prepossession'. In the final volume, he was still claiming that: 'I adhere steadily to *Principle* and to *Truth of Fact*.' By speaking truthfully, he added, journalists served future generations: 'Ages to come will have cause to Reproach the Men of this Generation, with leaving such Magazines of Scandal and Forgery, and so far Separated from the true Accounts of the same Fact, that they will not be able to know from our Testimony, when they speak Truth, or Report Lies.'⁸

Defoe did not publish news in the *Review*, but instead provided commentary on the events of the day. For much of its life, the *Review* consisted of a leading article, followed by a section of smaller items. To this end, he created the Scandalous Club (or Scandal Club), an anonymous group of often tongue-in-cheek moralists who passed judgement on various issues, including many consumer matters.

The Scandal Club proved immensely popular, with readers sending Defoe many letters seeking the club's advice and comment. Indeed, it was the Scandal Club that seems to have driven the success of the journal in its early days, with Defoe soon publishing the overflow of Scandal Club material in two short-term spin-off publications: the *Supplement*, which started in October 1704, and *The Little Review*, which started in June 1705. But despite this success, he, surprisingly, later dropped the club. He renamed the *Review*'s smaller section 'Miscellanea', and primarily used it to present material similar to that found in the leading article. The Defoe scholar Arthur Secord suggests this might have been because Defoe found the practical difficulties of producing the Scandal Club material too great. Certainly, for much of the time he was working on the *Review*, he was outside London engaged in espionage and

propaganda work for the government, principally in Scotland around the time of the Union with England. Secord suggests that Defoe may have preferred writing opinion essays that he could compose anywhere.⁹ That may be so, and explains why the *Review* evolved into a journal primarily concerned with the Union of England and Scotland. In fact, it seems clear that Defoe was paid by the government to publish pro-Union propaganda in the *Review*.¹⁰

If government backhanders and logistical realities help explain why Defoe chose to concentrate on political topics in the *Review*, other reasons suggest themselves as to why he chose to devote some of the journal's lines to consumer matters. First of all, his personal lack of business success notwithstanding, Defoe was extremely interested in economics, the very stuff of the consumer world. He declared in the last issue of the *Review* that 'Writing upon Trade was the Whore I really doated [*sic*] upon'.¹¹ He would later write an instruction book for businesspeople, *The Complete English Tradesman* (1727). Among the myriad economic issues he covered in his consumer journalism were forgery and the operations of London stock-jobbers (who bought and sold shares, and, in Defoe's time, worked in Exchange Alley, the predecessor of the London Stock Exchange).

Defoe was born into a Dissenting family and educated at a Dissenting Academy. This education had been preparing him for a life as a religious minister (he remained deeply religious all his life), but he abandoned that career path in favour of a life in business. Nevertheless, he had a predilection for righteous bombast in his writing, no doubt influenced by his religious training and ongoing interest in religious matters, and this often found expression in his consumer journalism. His audience would have appreciated this too: at the time he was writing, the eloquence of fine preachers was much admired. Defoe was acutely aware of the problems facing the urban poor – he had, after all, spent time in Newgate prison – and this appears to have influenced his decision to write on consumer issues. His consumer journalism covered the price and quality of basic staples like corn and fish, and he also described a riot by a mob of London's poor, protesting the price of coal. Defoe was a devoted family man, having married in 1684. His wife bore him seven children over their long and apparently happy life together, and his personal letters reveal a man who cared greatly for his family.¹² He would later write a three-volume instruction book on domestic life, *The Family Instructor* (1727). All this meant that he was interested in domestic matters, and wrote in the *Review* on such issues as the evils of grasping lawyers and tradesmen.

Finally, and most importantly, Defoe liked to entertain his readers. He made it clear that the material in the Scandal Club was there for entertainment, saying on the title page of volume one of the *Review* that the journal includes: 'AN Entertaining Part in every Sheet, BEING, ADVICE from the Scandal. CLUB, To the Curious Enquirers; in Answer to Letters sent them for that Purpose.'¹³ He was particularly fond of using humour, and much of his writing on consumer issues can be found in the pages of the Scandal Club. It seems, then, that he intended his consumer journalism to entertain, rather

than to have a political motivation. This is not to deny its importance. On the contrary, the success of his Scandal Club suggests that the matters it covered, including consumer matters, had a deep resonance with his readers and allow us to understand better their interests and concerns.

Turning now to a critical assessment of Defoe's consumer journalism, he frequently used stories in his journalism to illustrate his general points, admitting that 'I had rather tell you Ten Stories to no purpose, than omit one that may be useful', and much of his consumer journalism is in narrative form.¹⁴ In this, his approach is similar to the modern consumer journalistic technique of the case-study, whereby the journalist uses the story of a single wronged consumer as a springboard to give general advice to all readers who find themselves in a similar situation. In one case, a correspondent, C.F., complained to the Scandal Club about a lawyer who charged him 19 shillings 4 pence to recover a small debt.¹⁵ The club advised C.F. to become a schoolmaster and to give lessons on the danger of using lawyers. The club predicts that the lawyers will then buy off C.F. to obtain his silence. Defoe used this humorous tale deftly to illustrate his general and polemical point, which was to warn his readers that lawyers 'ruin, as far as in them lies, those that fall into their hands [...] this they allow to be generally true (without Prejudice to all the Gentlemen of Honesty and Honour concern'd in it) from the *Attorney General*, who Pleaded, or rather Scolded to Death, the Famous and Learned Sir *Walter Raleigh*, to the *Wretch* who is the Subject of this letter'.

Defoe also parodied the rapacity of some in the clergy when he told the story of a parish clerk who brings a parishioner before the Scandal Club.¹⁶ Again, Defoe used this case-study as the basis for a general warning to his readers about the clergy. The club reports that the clerk christened a baby and was duly paid by the parishioner, but the clerk then demanded more money. The parishioner thereupon took back some of the money and turned the clerk 'out of Doors, having no other way to be rid of him'. The club ruled that, although the parishioner had breached the peace, the parishioner's actions were understandable, and instructed the parish clerk 'to go Home, be contented, and furnish himself with a little more Manners'. Moving from the specific to the general, Defoe broadens his argument by describing the parish clerk as 'a Member of the *Black List* of City Mortality, one that occupies the Place of the unlearned, a Brother of the Corporation of *Psalmidists*'.

Another source of humour for Defoe was 'the Errors and Nonsense [*sic*] of our News-Writers'. He said that the *Review* would 'unravel sometimes the ridiculous and inconsistent Stories' in the other papers, and that this would be 'the Natural Consequence of a diligent Enquiry after Truth'. For Defoe, this was a consumer issue, in that exposing these errors showed the reader 'how your Pockets are Pickt [*sic*], and your Sences [*sic*] impos'd upon'.¹⁷ That is to say, newspaper readers were parting with their money only to read falsehoods and ludicrous errors. In this, Defoe's examples are reminiscent of the common magazine practice today of running examples of typographical and other

errors found in the daily newspapers and elsewhere. Take the following, for instance:

The London-Post of the 21st of August last, where in Advice from the *Hague*, by way of *Lisbon*, we are acquainted with some News from *Paris* [...] I think it might not be improper to let the Reader know that this is just as Direct an Intelligence, as if they shou'd say,

*There are Letters from Jamaica, by the last East India Ship, which give a more particular Account of a great Fight in Flanders.*¹⁸

Or this:

Flying-Post, N^o 1413. Paris.

'Our Troops found prodigious strong Entrenchments made in the Avenues, with a great many Cannon, *but of Wood*, which our Troops burnt and broke.

Pray, Gentlemen, *does our Author mean* Woodden [*sic*] Cannon?'¹⁹

As well as humour, Defoe sometimes infused his case-studies with pulpit-thumping rhetoric. In his denunciation of lawyers mentioned above, he also railed against them as 'Harpies, Monsters and Devils, who suck the Blood and Wealth of the Nation'.²⁰ Similarly, he felt strongly that forgery was a grievous crime, seeing it as endangering the wealth of honest people, proclaiming: 'O for a Gallows for some of these People! a little Hanging would be a Thunder Clap, that would disperse the Cloud of them that hovers about us.'²¹

Other Defoe case-studies employed drama, rather than quasi-religious rhetoric or public ridiculing. Defoe relates how an irate mob of the urban poor storms a session of the Scandal Club, protesting about the high price of coal.²² He tells us that the club heard 'a strange Clamour about their Ears this Week by the Poor, concerning the Price of Coals; and one bolder than the rest, told the Club, if they would not pass some Censure about it, they would Mob 'em, and pull the House down'. His gift of narrative creates a vivid image of a riotous mob ready to pull down the club's building. But was there any factual basis to the story: was the price of coal really high? He provided no evidence to suggest it was. Instead we are presented with a wholly fictional scene. The Scandal Club that heard the charge did not exist, and neither, therefore, did the mob that threatened it. Yet the rest of that story proceeds as if the story were a factual report. The plot thickens when the club learns from a lighter-man (who unloads the colliers) that some event did happen at sea, but the lighter-man's master had deliberately exaggerated reports of the event to drive up the price of coal. The club draws up a five-point list of resolutions, concluding: 'V: That to forge Letters of publick [*sic*] Disasters when there is none, *Real ones coming fast enough*, or to make them greater than they are, to raise the Price of Coals, is a Scandal to this Nation.'

Defoe returned to the matter in the following *Review*, where a coal merchant and a coal-jobber (a jobbing merchant who buys and sells coal) appear before the Club.²³ The coal-jobber and the merchant both give supposed reasons for the high price of coal, but the Scandal Club resolves that '*they were both*

Rogues, and enter'd it down as a certain Truth, that the dearness of Coals has been chiefly occasioned by the Jugling [*sic*] and Frauds [...] more than by Defects in Convoys, want of Sea-Men, or the like'.

Coal prices were relatively high at the time Defoe was writing, so the club's resolution would have no doubt delighted his readers.²⁴ But his report is not credible. He provides no evidence to support his claims that the coal price is being manipulated. Indeed, he did not name any of the individuals involved. Did any of these people actually exist? Let us not forget that they all appear before a fictional Scandal Club. Many other important aspects of the story remain a mystery too. For instance, he does not tell us what the crews of the colliers say happened at sea. This lack of information drives us to one conclusion: it seems that Defoe used a fictional story to create an exciting read about a topical issue.

Sometimes when Defoe had good evidence to hand he balked at using it. In 1710, some years after that mob had stormed the Scandal Club's offices complaining about the high price of coal, he returned to the issue, arguing that the London coal market was again being monopolised.²⁵ To support his case, he reproduced two coal-industry documents. The first details the profit earned by one collier over four voyages. Defoe describes the profit (38 pounds 15 shillings) as an example of the industry's 'Oppressions', but makes no effort to prove that the profit is oppressive. The second document apparently details various coal producers' price-fixing arrangements. Although Defoe denounced the coal producers' arrangements as 'Arbitrary and Tyrannical', he did not report their response to the document, nor provide any analysis of it. In fact, he deliberately avoided analysing the documents, saying, 'I only give you the two Papers now, I may speak to them hereafter', which he never did.

When it came to the price of coal, it seems that Defoe was doing no more than fanning the fires of public prejudice. The high price of coal was of public concern in London at the time he was writing. In 1711 Parliament passed an Act to break up the supposed coal-trade cartel.²⁶ But although economic historians point to the Act as evidence of the apparent monopolisation of the coal industry at the time, they acknowledge that direct economic evidence of a cartel is hard to find. In fact, it appears that the high price of coal had far more to do with high government taxes on it.²⁷ It has even been suggested that claims of a cartel existed only because London consumers were articulate and had the ear of Parliament.²⁸ It is disappointing that Defoe, who so enjoyed writing on trade, made such little effort to write anything of substance on the issue. So much for his claim that the role of the journalist is to leave behind truthful reports for the benefit of future generations.

Of even less help to historians is Defoe's vague discussion about the price of corn.²⁹ He observes that there is plenty of corn growing in the country and that the price charged for it is therefore 'extravagantly high'. Defoe insists that the corn market is being manipulated by 'money'd Men', but does not identify any of these nefarious individuals. He also claims that the magistrates

are not enforcing the anti-monopoly laws, but does not explain why they are inactive. He did not ask anybody in the corn industry or any magistrate to explain the situation.

Indeed, in cases where Defoe was apparently writing about real events and organisations, he often admitted quite openly that he took little effort to research the issues raised by those whose letters he published in the *Review*. He once acknowledged that he 'printed such Letters as have been sent me by sundry Hands, on the publick [*sic*] Subjects this Paper has Treated of, without Enquiring much into the Design of the Senders, for let their End be what it will'.³⁰ This no doubt reflects the relaxed journalistic attitudes of the time when it came to separating fact from fiction, and perhaps Defoe's prolonged absences from London which precluded his investigating matters thoroughly.

For instance, Defoe ran a letter about an apparently sham charity.³¹ The unnamed correspondent recounts that 'the Priest of our Parish hath been very industrious to beg Money on that Account, and hath been with me, but I do not find he hath any Letters-Patents from the QUEEN for such Collections'. The correspondent declares that they have heard the campaign to raise charitable donations 'is a Cheat'. Defoe agrees that the charity sounds suspicious but makes no effort to investigate it himself or to seek comment from it.

Another case where Defoe was unwilling to investigate matters fully was his assessment of poor-quality fish.³² He relates that the Scandal Club had received a letter from 'C.M.' complaining about the activities of the Fishmongers Company. Defoe begins by declaring that the members of the Scandal Club 'do not affirm, nor have not enquir'd into the Truth of Fact of the following Letter'. That is to say, he would not stand behind his story, and made no attempt to get all the facts before publishing his report. According to C.M., the Fishmongers Company has 'Farmed all the Mackarel [*sic*]-Trade, and Engrossed [*monopolised*] it to themselves; and to make the more Advantage of it, order the Mackarel [*sic*]-Boats, that are coming up the River, to stay behind, till they have sold what Stock they have of that Commodity, at their own Price'. C.M. goes on to claim that, according to an informant, the fish kept back from the market spoils, and 'when thus stinking, they get cry'd in the Streets, to be bought by the Lower sort of People'. C.M. is concerned that such activity 'may occasion an Infectious Distemper; yea, for ought I know, a Plague among us'. Despite having claimed he was dedicated to writing the truth, Defoe was clearly quite prepared to publish a letter that is nothing more than hearsay, yet which goes so far as to claim the Fishmongers Company's activities may lead to a plague, a very real concern in Defoe's London.

Although concluding that letting the fish go bad 'is certainly Scandalously Illegal', the Scandal Club then backs away, saying that '*if it be fact, and can be fairly prov'd*, they wou'd be glad to hear farther, but till it be so, they think 'tis but just to forbear their Censure of the Persons it is charg'd on'. That is to say, Defoe wanted it both ways: to denounce the Fishmongers Company yet avoid legal action by admitting he does not have all the facts. As it was, no reply from the Fishmongers Company was ever published.

Defoe gave an equally one-sided account about the accuracy of almanacs.³³ A letter from a reader, published in late January 1706, notes that almanacs 'take upon them to tell us, what sort of Weather it will be, which way the Winds blow; when it will Snow, or Rain, or Freeze', but that the almanacs were frequently inaccurate: 'Gold-Smith's-Almanack, for the end of January Fine Mild Weather, for the beginning of January, Frost and Snow; whereas, the former part of the Month was mild Weather; and now a deep Snow and Severe Frost. Moor's Almanack says, the Month ends with Moderate weather, and we all find it immoderately Cold'. The correspondent asks Defoe to explain 'by what Rule' almanacs 'tell us of the present Time'. Defoe simply responds: 'why the Rule of Picking your Pockets'. Insisting that predicting the weather is largely guesswork, he pronounces the almanacs 'a Cheat'. While his scepticism about eighteenth-century almanacs is no doubt justified, it is symptomatic of the age that he gave the authors of Gold-Smith's and Moor's no opportunity to respond to the charges.

Sometimes traders did respond to Defoe's criticisms and showed that he did not know what he was talking about. One correspondent, identified as 'A.C.', wrote to the Scandal Club pointing out that it is the task of the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen to set the price and weights of bread (known as 'assize-bread'), but that the bakers ignore this price and overcharge, and the Lord Mayor does nothing to stop this.³⁴ A.C. asks why this should be the case. Defoe is in no doubt, declaring that it is because 'the Bakers are K-----s, and the Magistrates -----'. He appended his intemperate, albeit humorous, outburst with 'if any Man can give us a better Reason, we Desire to hear it'.

It soon turned out that they could, with Defoe subsequently publishing letters that set the record straight.³⁵ One letter explained that consumers prefer to buy bread in different weights from that stipulated by the price controls as this allows them more easily to compare prices and to ensure the bread is not being sold in short measures. The letter says that a court trial on the matter determined that this was a more sensible way for bread to be priced. A second letter, from a baker, makes the same point, noting that 'should I put in Practice the Order of the Magistrates in the Weekly Bill, and make none but Assize-Bread, I should son [sic] lose all my Customers, and be forc'd to shut up Doors'. Defoe thereupon did a complete *volte-face*, admitting that the 'Letters Explain the Case so well' and that 'our Society not being vers'd in the Bakers Trade, has done some Prejudice to that Fraternity'. Defoe had preferred being deliberately provocative and, one suspects pandering to his readers' prejudices, rather than give his readers useful information based on thorough research.

At least on this score Defoe admitted he was wrong. Other times, he was wilfully blind to the facts. Defoe had no time for stock-jobbers, denouncing them as 'Sons of the Fraudulent' who engaged in 'infinite Shams and Frauds', such as manipulating the news to raise and then depress the prices of shares to suit their own ends. As well as a general political issue, he clearly saw this as a consumer matter, saying the actions of stock-jobbers resulted in 'the Ruin

of innumerable Families'.³⁶ He used his most righteous prose to describe his female personification of the Stock-jobber. She was, he said, 'born a Thief, bred up a Cheat, and will die a Prostitute [...] her great Bawdy-House is *Exchange Alley*, her Pimps are the Brokers, her Cullies the Merchants and Tradesmen, her Family is of the Devil'.³⁷

In one of his denunciations of stock-jobbers, Defoe discusses a report of an English military setback in Flanders.³⁸ The report turns out to be false, but not before it had driven down the price of shares in London. The journalist in Defoe begins by admitting that 'no Stock-jobber had any Hand' in the false report, but adds that 'it will be very hard to make any Body believe' this. This is all the excuse the imaginative writer in Defoe needs to vilify stock-jobbers. He uses wonderful dialogue in a vivid street scene to indicate that the false report *did* have its origins in Exchange Alley:

One crys [*sic*] – *Is there a Post?* Answer, *no*, – but they have it in *Exchange-Alley*. Has the Government any Express? – *NO*, but it is in every Body's Mouth in *Exchange Alley*. Is there any Account of it at the Secretary's Offices? – *NO*, but 'tis all the News in *Exchange-Alley* – Why, but how does it come? – *Nay*, no Body knows – *But 'tis very hot in Exchange Alley*.

The term 'Exchange Alley' appears four times in this passage, the repetition emphasising the supposed guilt of the stock-jobbers. But once we pull back from the entertaining rhetoric, we must acknowledge that Defoe has contradicted his own factual report in order to provide some excellent imaginative writing. As with the coal mob discussed earlier, Defoe preferred to write a gripping story rather than a factual one.

At least once, Defoe's baseless statements on a consumer issue saw him ridiculed by his readers.³⁹ Despite acknowledging that 'I am no profess'd Physician', Defoe offered his readers medical advice regarding 'this New and unaccountable Distemper' afflicting people in Britain and overseas during the hot summer weeks of 1712. Warning his readers that he expected the distemper 'will be very Mortal' if his advice were ignored, he told them to purge their bodies with Epsom salts or something similar.

Yet some of Defoe's readers had far more common sense on this matter than he did. In the next *Review* he indignantly complained that his advice had been 'turn'd into Ridicule and Banter, by the People of this Age; no less than by three different Companies was I accosted in this manner in one day'. One passer-by asked of him: 'What is the matter that you make such ado about a little Summer Sickness, and disorder the People with Melancholly [*sic*] Notions of the Plague?' Defoe thought his readers were underestimating the danger: 'we had a shock like this, before the last Dreadful Plague', he warns.⁴⁰

Defoe refused to let the summer distemper issue rest, returning to it yet again in the next *Review*.⁴¹ He emphasised the seriousness of the danger by referring to the Black Death that had visited England the previous century. He quotes a Bill of Mortality that detailed the high number of people who died of plague during one September week in 1665. But he barely spends any time

discussing the mysterious summer distemper that began the whole debate. Instead, he devotes most of this article to the plague. Clearly, it is now the plague that really interests him, not summer distempers. Defoe here used his consumer journalism to fire his imaginative mind. His *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a masterpiece of imaginative historical journalism published some ten years later, contains the very same Bill of Mortality mentioned in this *Review* article.⁴²

Defoe was interested in consumer matters and, although comprising only a small part of the *Review's* vast output, wrote about them with great gusto. This, it would appear, was for several reasons. As a would-be economist, it was an area he was interested in. It gave him the opportunity to use the kind of religious rhetoric that was popular at the time and which he, no doubt, revelled in. It allowed him to express his concerns for the urban poor and to write on family matters, a topic close to his heart. His consumer journalism anticipated many of the techniques and concerns of modern consumer journalism, but although insisting he only published truthful reports, he ultimately wrote his consumer journalism as a way to entertain his readers, rather than to provide them with factual reportage.

Defoe's reluctance to investigate consumer issues fully and his propensity to invent stories no doubt in part reflect the fact that he was often out of London when writing the *Review*. He was simply not in a position to investigate stories, and so preferred simply to recount what his correspondents told him and, it appears, to invent some of the stories. Further, he was writing in an age when the demarcation between fact and fiction was far more blurred than it is today. The title pages of *Moll Flanders* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* both insist that those two fictional works are true, after all.⁴³

And it was light relief that his readers craved. Not only did the Scandal Club generate two spin-off publications, but when Defoe closed the Club his readers evidently pleaded with him to re-instate it. He chided them for their interest in such entertainments and personified them in the form of a mad man ('M'), who complains here that Defoe has dropped the Scandal Club:

M. Why, 'tis an humble Petition from the Hawkers and News-sellers, that you will turn your Tale a little to something diverting and pleasant, and not be always canting and talking religiously; they say they wish you would set up your *Scandal Club* again, then the People would buy the Paper; but while you are upon these serious Subjects, it's like an old Ballad, no Body cares for it, and when they offer it to Sale to people, they huff them intolerably.⁴⁴

It seems that readers were as interested in reading about consumer rip-offs in Defoe's day as are the millions who read about them today.

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NOTES

1. See, for instance, Theodore Cron, 'Journalism, consumer', in *Encyclopedia of the Consumer Movement*, ed. Stephen Brobeck (Santa Barbara 1997), p.342-50, and Eirlys Roberts, *Consumers* (London 1966).
2. Consumers Union, 'About us' (New York 2005), <http://www.consumerreports.org>
3. For instance, discussions of the latest domestic cookers and a sceptical assessment of a wine merchant's advertisement can be found in *Household Words*, ed. Charles Dickens, London, 3 December 1853, p.333-36, and 24 December 1853, p.403-406, respectively.
4. Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (Fort Worth 1997).
5. The only complete version of the *Review* currently available is Daniel Defoe, *Review*, ed. Arthur Secord, 9 vols (New York 1938). However, a new version, edited by John McVeagh, is being progressively published by Pickering and Chatto, London. See <http://www.pickeringchatto.com/defoesreview.htm>
6. Paula Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe His Life* (Baltimore and London 1989), p.153.
7. Ultimately, the *Review* stretched to nine volumes. Defoe regarded the ninth volume as a new journal and labelled it volume one, but this paper follows scholarly convention in regarding it as the ninth volume of the *Review*.
8. Defoe, *Review* i.1, ii.253, v.231, ix.1, viii.832.
9. Arthur Secord, introduction to *Defoe's Review* (New York 1938), p.xx.
10. Maximilian Novak, *Daniel Defoe Master of Fictions* (Oxford 2001), ch.9; Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe*, ch.9.
11. Defoe, *Review*, ix.214.
12. Richard West, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Daniel Defoe* (London 1997), p.15.
13. Title page of volume one of the *Review*. Similar requests for letters to be sent can be found in *Review*, i.247, iv.7. Defoe may have invented many of the letters himself, a practice he is known to have undertaken in other journals (James Sutherland, *Daniel Defoe A Critical Study*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971, p.84; Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe*, p.539-40). For instance, his correspondent C.M.'s warning about a plague is reminiscent of Defoe's own plague warning (Defoe, *The Little Review*, ii.7; Defoe, *Review*, ix.13). But while Defoe acknowledged that other writers had been accused of writing their own letters, he denied doing so himself, insisting that the large number of letters received by the *Review* left him 'far from having occasion to do so' (Defoe, *Review*, viii.333).
14. Defoe, *Review*, ii.369.
15. Defoe, *Review*, i.247-48.
16. Defoe, *Review*, i.183.
17. Defoe, *Review*, i.5, i.3-4, i.6.
18. Defoe, *Review*, i.5.
19. Defoe, *Review*, i.116.
20. Defoe, *Review*, i.247.
21. Defoe, *Review*, v.266-67.
22. Defoe, *Review*, i.56.
23. Defoe, *Review*, i.60.
24. William Hausman, 'A Model of the London Coal Trade in the Eighteenth Century', in *The Mining Industry*, vol.1, ed. T. Boyns (London 1997), p.286-97.
25. Defoe, *Review*, vii.155-56.
26. Mentioned by Defoe, *Review*, viii.560.
27. Hausman, 'London Coal Trade'; Paul Sweezy, *Monopoly and Competition in the English Coal Trade 1550-1850* (Cambridge, Mass. 1938); Thomas Ashton and Joseph Sykes, *The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd edn (Manchester 1964).
28. Michael Flinn and David Stoker, *The History of the British Coal Industry*, vol.2, 1700-1830: *The Industrial Revolution* (Oxford 1984).
29. Defoe, *Review*, vi.329-35.
30. Defoe, *Review*, viii.333.
31. Defoe, *Review*, iv.651-52.
32. Defoe, *The Little Review*, ii.7.
33. Defoe, *Review*, iii.52.
34. Defoe, *Review*, i.248.
35. Defoe, *Supplement*, i.7-8.

36. Defoe, *Review*, i.47, v.427, i.191-92, vi.202, v.426.
37. Defoe, *Review*, v.428.
38. Defoe, *Review*, vi.202.
39. Defoe, *Review*, ix.12.
40. Defoe, *Review*, ix.13.
41. Defoe, *Review*, ix.15-16.
42. Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), ed. Paula Backscheider (New York 1992), p.162.
43. Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722), ed. Juliet Mitchell (Harmondsworth 1978), p.27; Defoe, *Plague Year*, p.3.
44. Defoe, *Review*, v.317.