

# TOWARD A TROUBLESHOOTING MANUAL FOR JOURNALISM HISTORY

By Michael Schudson

*It is argued that journalism historians would do well to avoid several kinds of troubles that have plagued the field in the past. Among these are (1) the assumption that the media always are central to a historical event or process; (2) the assumption that commercial forces always have a corrupting influence on journalism practice; (3) the tendency to reduce complex events to technological or economic explanations; (4) the acceptance of the view that journalism is in a constant state of decline; and, (5) the assumption that the news media came into existence because they served a popular need. Historians of journalism are urged to avoid these common mistakes by becoming less insulated from other domains of historical research.*

If you look in the back of the owner's manual for your computer, you will find a "troubleshooting" section that identifies things that commonly go wrong and what to do about them. Journalism history could profit from a troubleshooting manual, too. What follows is a list of some common troubles in the field that the journalism historian should be alert to.

Students of journalism or "the media" in general are often attracted to the subject because they believe journalism to be important. Fair enough. But the importance of journalism, relative to other factors in human affairs, is to be demonstrated, not assumed. It is all too common to find this forgotten and the premise of the research becomes its conclusion. Thus the late Michael and the late Edwin Emery write in *The Press and America*, for decades the leading textbook in U.S. journalism history, that the Federalist papers were remarkably effective weapons in the Federalist cause, "so effective that they gave their name to the party that was actually nationalist in doctrine rather than federalist." The Federalists, they assert, "won their fight with this journalistic effort."<sup>1</sup>

The Emerys do not feel obliged to demonstrate this; they are practicing what David Hackett Fischer has dubbed "the fallacy of tunnel history."<sup>2</sup> They do not bother to examine possible alternative explanations; they do not seem troubled, or even aware, that authorities who specialize in the history of the Constitution do not agree with them.<sup>3</sup> The specific objective of the Federalist papers was to convince voters of New York to elect pro-Constitution delegates to the ratification convention in Poughkeepsie. In this respect, the Federalist papers were an abysmal failure. The ratification



**Media-  
Centricity  
or Media  
Solipsism**

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J&MC Quarterly  
Vol. 74, No. 3  
Autumn 1997  
463-476  
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convention delegates were overwhelmingly anti-Constitution (forty-six opponents of the Constitution, nineteen advocates). New York would have voted against ratification if any other major state had moved in the same direction. The Poughkeepsie convention finally endorsed the Constitution not because Madison, Hamilton, and Jay's newspaper articles persuaded them but because ten other states had already ratified and the Constitution was going to go into effect in any event.

Historian Lance Banning concludes that the influence of the Federalist papers is "difficult to measure." The essays could not have done much to influence ratification conventions in Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Georgia, all of which met before many of the papers were published. In states that ratified later, fourteen newspapers reprinted some of the essays and other members of the political elite in these states received copies of the New York newspapers from colleagues in New York. It is clear that pro-ratification leaders in some of the conventions drew on the Federalist papers for their arguments.<sup>4</sup> But no political historian would claim that this "journalistic effort" was decisive. No one could come to such a conclusion unless it was the premise with which they began.

It may be that the single most persuasive factor leading to ratification is that George Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention. Washington's towering reputation in every state gave pro-ratification forces powerful support. Moreover, the Federalists were in every respect better organized than anti-Federalists and, with few exceptions, they included among them the leading intellects of political leadership. It is highly likely that the Federalist papers helped strengthen the Constitution's cause in some of the states. Isn't this significance enough? Why inflate claims for media influence to the point where they become obviously false?

Other journalism historians have been much more careful. Jean Folkerts and Dwight L. Teeter Jr. doubt that the Federalist Papers had much impact on ratification.<sup>5</sup> Carol Sue Humphrey also observes that the Federalist Papers are "not considered very effective in the ratification struggle."<sup>6</sup> Their judgments, unlike that of the Emerys, are consistent with the work of other historians but they do not entertain the difficult task - Banning comes much closer - of establishing grounds by which such judgments might sensibly be made.

The Emerys again grant the media more than their due when they retell the old tale that the yellow press led the United States into war with Spain in 1898. Citing the standard but deeply flawed studies from the 1930s by Marcus Wilkerson and Joseph Wisan, the Emerys contend that a group of newspapers "so handled the news of events leading up to the crisis of the sinking of the Maine that a war psychosis was developed."<sup>7</sup>

The Emerys take a more nuanced view than the older accounts, observing that the newspapers fanned, but did not spark, the flames of American imperialism. Expansionist sentiment and a desire "to flex the nation's muscles" provided the atmosphere in which the newspapers operated.<sup>8</sup> However, this does not modify their basic assumption that public opinion sets American foreign policy. The Emerys make no improvement at all upon the works of the 1930s in this respect and never ask how media sensationalism or jingoistic public opinion got translated in the 1890s into Congressional and Presidential war-making policies. In fact, there is no evidence that Washington decision makers were influenced by media sensationalism or, for that matter, public opinion in general. Historians who have studied the McKinley administration, as opposed to those who have studied



newspapers of the 1890s, have little or nothing to say about the yellow press. Lewis Gould, to name one leading political historian of the McKinley era, curtly dismisses the yellow press as a significant factor leading to war.<sup>9</sup> Mark Matthew Welter's study of Minnesota papers 1895 to 1898 not only shows the Minnesota press did not become jingoistic but succeeds in tracing the widespread view of press influence on the war to post-World War I revisionist historians who were also intent on proving (and also mistakenly) that British propaganda led the United States into World War I.<sup>10</sup>

The best discussion of the subject is probably Robert Hilderbrand's *Power and the People: Executive Management of Public Opinion in Foreign Affairs, 1897-1921*. Hilderbrand shows that McKinley had some concern when he came into office that the public was only too eager to intervene in Cuba. But he never considered public opinion a serious problem and by the time he began to formulate a Cuban policy, several months after assuming office, there was no public pressure on him one way or another. His policy, from the start, aggressively threatened Spain with intervention unless Spain accepted reforms in Cuba. For months, McKinley pressed Spain privately, without speaking publicly on the issue. As diplomatic efforts wore on, McKinley increasingly courted public opinion and his efforts paid off in a supportive press and mail running overwhelmingly in favor of his policy. Newspapers became more outspoken in supporting war, but this only helped McKinley's strategy of consolidating support before declaring for war himself.

As for the yellow journals, Hilderbrand argues that they "were wasting their ink on McKinley . . . he rarely saw anything of their efforts. Not only did he neglect as a rule to read either the *New York Journal* or *New York World*, but clippings from their columns were almost entirely absent from his scrapbooks as well." The yellow press "played little part in the administration's evaluation of public attitudes, a part best expressed . . . by the fact that it served as the butt of many White House jokes." Hilderbrand concludes that McKinley almost completely ignored the sensationalist press.<sup>11</sup>

None of this apparently came to the notice of Rodger Streitmatter who walks through the same tired legend in his recently published *Mightier Than The Sword*. This work has one point to make: the news media have made a difference in American history. The book's laudable aim is to inspire journalism students in their chosen field and to keep them from wishing they were studying something useful like engineering or physical therapy. But Streitmatter's claim that in the Spanish-American War "the might of the Fourth Estate had, in short, forced the president of the United States to capitulate on a matter of grave importance to humanity," never strays beyond the newspapers themselves for evidence.<sup>12</sup> No biography of McKinley is cited, no recollections of Washington politicians, not a single work by a political historian or foreign policy historian. This is a classic case of media solipsism.

Probably the other most famous exaggeration of media influence is the notion that television news, by bringing the horrors of war into people's homes, led to widespread public revulsion at the war in Vietnam and powered the antiwar movement. This thesis has been advanced most avidly by apologists for the American military rather than by press historians. It is definitively refuted in Daniel Hallin's *The Uncensored War* (1986). An earlier article by international relations specialist Michael Mandelbaum elegantly made a similar case while political and military historian George Moss has thoroughly reviewed the literature on the topic and come to the same conclusion as Hallin and Mandelbaum.<sup>13</sup> While the Emerys apparently

consulted some of these works, they wrote nothing at all about the whole question. Without making any explicit claims for media influence, they nonetheless offer an exclusively media-centric vision of the war, implicitly reinforcing the view that the media played a decisive role. Again, Folkerts and Teeter provide much sounder judgment and show that they have read Hallin and Vietnam historian Stanley Karnow who also agrees that media influence on the conduct of the war was minimal.<sup>14</sup> But on the single question about the media in Vietnam that has most engaged political, military, and general historians, the Emerys are silent. Likewise missing from action in engaging the leading scholarship in the field is Rodger Streitmatter.<sup>15</sup>

### **Anticom- mercial Bias**

Deans, provosts, business school, and engineering professors may hobnob with business leaders, but most of the rest of us in the university don't. There is a strong inclination to pride ourselves on having chosen a profession where money is not god, and we are inclined to think ourselves purer than the rest of the world, untainted by the love of filthy lucre. In the history of journalism, there is an inclination to think of commercial forces as forever threatening independence of mind, and the history of journalism begins to look like the tension in a newspaper between the editorial department and the business department, writ large. In such a battle, no journalism historian has any doubt which is the force of good and which is the force of evil.

But is the profit motive always corrupting? It is part of our New England Puritan heritage to believe that wealth is corrupting, but is this necessarily so? Is it always corrupting in the history of journalism? Have the successes of American journalism and its distinctive position in the larger world of journalism emerged entirely in spite of and in no way because of the preposterous amounts of money individual entrepreneurs have been able to accumulate in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television?

Take the work by Gerald Baldasty, *The Commercialization of the Press in the Nineteenth Century*, a useful and well researched study. Nonetheless, Baldasty falls right into the "profits are doom" model of journalism history. His comparison of newspapers from the 1830s to newspapers from the 1890s shows that there was a decline over time in the percentage of news space devoted to political news. He concludes that the "commercialization" of news in the mid-nineteenth century led to a decline in the importance of political coverage and that, for a democracy, obviously is a bad thing. The antebellum press, he writes, "produced political debate of potential value for the broad public" while "the late nineteenth-century press's subservience to advertising interests did not."<sup>16</sup>

What's wrong with this picture? A reader would have to turn to the book's appendix to find out. In a set of dramatic tables in the text, Baldasty shows that the percentage of news devoted to politics dropped sharply in newspapers during the nineteenth century. For instance, it declined from 50.5% in his sample of five antebellum papers to 19.4% in his sample of eight late nineteenth-century metropolitan papers.<sup>17</sup> In the appendix, but nowhere else in the book, Baldasty provides not only the percentage figures for his newspaper sample but the total amount of newspaper space. Only there can the reader recognize that the 1830 to 1900 "decline" in the *percentage* of political news in the press was actually a huge increase in the total amount of political news. Seven of the eight newspapers in Baldasty's 1897 sample provided more political reporting in a week than *any* of the five papers in his



1831 sample. The *New York Evening Post*, *New York Journal*, and *Chicago Tribune* in 1897 each printed more than five times as much political news as the most political paper of 1831!<sup>18</sup>

The increasingly lucrative newspapers of the Gilded Age and after had many more pages, many more reporters, and much more political news than the Jacksonian press, even if they also had much more news of non-political matters. Baldasty's scrupulousness in reporting his findings allows a careful reader to recover this, but his adherence to the "profits are doom" school prevented him from making these observations himself.

Baldasty could be right that the relative displacement of political news by other news topics in the late nineteenth-century press reduced the prestige or salience of "the political" in American culture. But that would have to be argued. It would have to be argued that the percentage of news space matters more than the total column-inches. It would have to be argued that newspapers with no local political news in the 1830s did more for political discourse than newspapers with lots of local news in the 1890s. All this and more could have been argued were it not so easy to assume that commercialization necessarily has negative consequences.

An anticommercial bias has also contributed to misunderstandings about the significance of the shrinking soundbite in the recent past, but I will take up that topic later.

No one is a Marxist since the end of the Cold War, at least not very loudly, but a tendency to reduce complex social phenomena to an economic or technological cause remains as near at hand as ever, among thinkers left, right, and center. If crude economic determinism is not much in vogue, technological determinism seems never entirely out of fashion.

One of the most stubborn beliefs in journalism history is that "objectivity" became the common practice in journalism in the late nineteenth century and after because (a) the telegraph put a premium on a terse, factual style, (b) the wire services required value-free reporting to serve clients of various political allegiances, and (c) newspapers in general found profit in winning over both Democratic and Republican readers.

The case for the decisive role of the telegraph was made well by Donald L. Shaw in several key articles. His study of Wisconsin newspapers from 1852 to 1916 found a decline in news bias over the period, as general accounts would have led him to expect. But Shaw finds a particularly sharp decline between 1880 and 1884, a period in which there was a leap from 47% to 89% of wire-based stories in Wisconsin newspapers' coverage of the presidential campaign. Later, and more slowly, nonwire news also showed declining bias, a fact that Shaw attributes to reporters learning to imitate wire service style.<sup>19</sup>

Shaw's quantitative study is reinforced, more allusively, by James Carey's "Technology and Ideology," a justly famous essay brimming with ideas. Among Carey's arguments is that the telegraph required removing the colloquial and the regional twang from a language that would now be available everywhere; that it turned the correspondent who analyzed news into a stringer who just relayed facts; and that the high cost of telegraphic transmission forced journalistic prose to become "lean and unadorned."<sup>20</sup>

The logic of Shaw's and Carey's arguments seems at first glance unassailable and there is genuine satisfaction in finding so complex a social change as a shift in literary style to be so neatly and simply explained. But that

### ***Economic Reduction- ism and Technologi- cal Deter- minism***

is exactly the temptation of economic and technological reductionisms that must be resisted. The beauty in these explanations may be only skin-deep. In this case, there are three problems. First, the explanation is vague about just what it explains—and it may explain too much. If Shaw and Carey are correct, should we not expect newspapers by the 1890s or at least by 1900 or the first years of the twentieth century, a full generation after Shaw's critical period, to be decreasingly partisan? Or to be displaying their partisanship in increasingly subtle ways? Should we not expect newspaper prose to be "lean" and telegraphic? Should we not expect leading newspapers to be focusing increasingly on just relaying "facts"?

But in 1900, newspaper partisanship was still blatant, prose was still, by modern standards, long-winded. In fact, the ideals of journalistic prose by 1900 seem to have been quite varied. Far from cohering around a telegraphic center, the language of dashing correspondents from Cuba just before and during the Spanish-American War was personal, colorful, and romantic. The human interest reporting of reporters enchanted with urban life was sentimental. Coverage of politics was often self-consciously sarcastic and humorous. This was not prose stripped bare.

Now, this is my own observation, based on reading a fair number of newspapers of the turn of the century, not based on any systematic evaluation. This would be a very thin basis for controverting Shaw and Carey if their own work were based on more systematic content analysis. But this brings out the second problem with the technological-economic case: it is based on limited data, including data not easily bent to the overall argument. Carey's work is apparently entirely impressionistic. As for Shaw's, it has some curious features if it is to be a basis for a technologically determinist argument. Between 1852, when Wisconsin newspapers used no wire service stories in campaign coverage, and 1880, when half of the stories were wire stories, there was no decrease in measured bias (actually, there was a small increase).<sup>21</sup> Why should this increase from zero to 47% wire stories have produced no decrease in bias when the increase from 47% to 89% in the next four years led to a dramatic drop in news bias? (There is also the fairly steep increase in news bias from 1888 to 1892; only after that is there a steadier decline. This is another anomaly that does not fit Shaw's explanation.) This makes no sense if the constraints of telegraphy necessarily force or at least have a very close affinity to a new prose style.

There is a further problem: neither Carey nor Shaw give close consideration to alternative hypotheses. One hypothesis I advanced in *Discovering the News* (1978) is that professional allegiance to a separation of facts and values awaited, first, the rising status and independence of reporters relative to their employes, a change in journalism that developed gradually between the 1870s and World War I, and second, the emergence of serious professional discussion about "objectivity," which came only after World War I. Only with these developments was there the social organizational and intellectual foundations for institutionalizing a set of journalistic practices to give "objectivity" force.<sup>22</sup>

I now think there is an even better explanation. It is vital to remember how deeply partisan and how closely affiliated with party most newspapers remained until the end of the nineteenth century. It is also important to remember that in places like Wisconsin, the vast majority of these partisan papers were Republican. That might have made 1884 an unusual year, because many of the most prominent Republican papers in the country (including papers like the *New York Evening Post*, the *Boston Herald*, and the



*Springfield Republican*) abandoned Republican standard-bearer James G. Blaine. It is quite possible that the 1880 to 1884 decline in news bias on which Shaw builds his argument had more to do with the unusual nature of the 1884 campaign when issues of the personal integrity or corruption of the candidates, rather than party loyalty, played so central a role.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult for us today to fully grasp how deeply partisanship ran in nineteenth-century American journalism. Everyone quotes the famous paragraph in Adolph Ochs' statement of purpose on taking over the *New York Times* in 1896, about how the paper would give the news "impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or interest involved." Nearly everyone (including *The Press and America*) fails to quote the next paragraph of Ochs' statement which laid out his commitment to sound money, tariff reform, low taxes, and limited government. Ochs took these principles seriously enough to march, along with top editors of his paper, in the parade for the "Gold Democratic" ticket in 1896.<sup>24</sup> There is a tendency to push "objectivity" back to the 1890s, or earlier, when in fact it was far from an established practice or ideal until later. In my own earlier work, I traced the ideology of "objectivity" to the 1920s, which I think is correct, but I also wrote of a general trend toward political independence from the mid-nineteenth century on, and I greatly overstated its importance.<sup>25</sup>

The notion that the move from partisanship to objectivity was economically motivated is widely believed but nowhere justified. The Emerys put the point this way: "Offering the appearance of fairness was important to owners and editors trying to gain their share of a growing readership and the resulting advertising revenues."<sup>26</sup> But was it? Readership was growing so rapidly in the late nineteenth century – from 3.5 million daily newspaper readers in 1880 to 33 million in 1920, chances are that a variety of journalistic styles would have been economically rewarding. Indeed, they were. Very likely the most lucrative option was strident partisanship. Certainly this characterized circulation leaders of the day like William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Heated political campaigns and the newspapers' ardent participation in them were circulation-builders, not circulation-losers.<sup>27</sup>

Another factor in the eventual triumph of a professional journalism is that the very concept of politics changed from 1880 to 1920 under the impact of Mugwump and Progressive reforms. Political parties came under attack in this era through a variety of reforms – the Australian ballot, civil service reform, corrupt practices acts, voter registration laws, the initiative and referendum, the popular primary, the direct election of senators, nonpartisan municipal elections, and so forth. Politics began to be seen increasingly as an administrative science that required experts. Voting came to be seen as an activity in which voters make choices among programs and candidates, not one in which they loyally turn out in ritual solidarity to their party. As Michael McGerr has persuasively argued, this new understanding of politics helped transform a rabidly partisan press to a professionally respectable, objective press.<sup>28</sup>

None of this suggests that economic or technological factors are irrelevant to explaining this central case of social change in American journalism. But it is a mistake to assume that they were decisive, without exploring alternative possibilities and without taking seriously the political context of late-nineteenth century journalism.

Another example of premature technological determinism would be the familiar assumption that the decline of newspapers and newspaper

circulation has been caused by the increasing reliance of citizens on television for news. It is hard to doubt that television has been a contributing factor. But Leo Bogart points out, citing cross-national data, that from 1964 to 1984, as television achieved a saturation level of usage in industrialized countries around the world, newspaper circulation per capita rose in as many industrialized countries as it fell. A number of observers have pointed to the fact that patterns of suburban living and changing patterns of newspaper distribution have probably contributed more to stagnant or declining newspaper circulation than the availability of television in its own right.<sup>29</sup>

Economic and technological factors are of course important in the history of journalism. In fact, there are vital topics here that have been badly neglected. Some of them may not be topics on which there is enough relevant evidence to say anything. For instance, the introduction of telephones must surely have changed the way reporters worked at the end of the nineteenth century. Folkerts and Teeter reproduce an old Remington typewriter advertisement and caption it, "The typewriter revolutionized the newsroom."<sup>30</sup> Maybe so, but "typewriter" does not have an entry in their index or a mention in their narrative. Nor have I come upon more than a passing mention in reporters' memoirs or in trade journals of the day. Louis Brownlow writes in his autobiography of his early days on the *Nashville Banner* when there was "only one telephone" in the newsroom, no "rewrite man," and reporters could not telephone in their stories. There were also no typewriters, he recalls: "All copy was written with a pencil, and, when the stuff did get back to the office, it received frequently but a cursory glance from the managing editor before it went directly to the composing-room."<sup>31</sup> The trade journal, *The Journalist*, marking its fourteenth birthday in 1898, recalled that in 1884 there were many more errand boys and messengers than in 1898 when the telegraph and telephone were more fully integrated into production. There were also more women in the newspaper office by 1898 because they were superior to men at typing and – "although the fact is an unjust one" – they work for less pay.<sup>32</sup> But mentions like these are few and fugitive.

It may be no different today. Think of how important photocopying machines have been, or telephone answering machines, or WATS lines, or FAX machines, in changing the work routines of news gathering in the 1970s and 1980s – yet there is little written about the impact of these technologies in journalism. This is not to mention the impact of trucks and automobiles on news gathering and newspaper distribution, or the shift from film to videotape in television news production, or any number of other technological changes that have altered the face of journalism. But have any of these technologies found their historian? Most of them have not even found their way into footnotes.

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## Declinism

There is so much wrong with the world at present, including the world of journalism, that it is hard to take seriously anyone who suggests that things may be getting better – or, at least, that they are not obviously getting worse. But it is just as intellectually phlegmatic to accept an unthinking decline-and-fall view as it was once to unthinkingly assume Whiggish progress. David Hackett Fischer has warned that the fallacy of "Whig history" is matched by "an anti-Whig history which commits the same fallacy in an inverted form."<sup>33</sup> James Carey, in worrying over this matter some years ago, said as much, but I fear his warnings were largely unheeded.<sup>34</sup>



One of the most influential versions of declinism is that of Jurgen Habermas, influential at least among cultural historians and media scholars outside of the narrow field of journalism history. Habermas argued that a "bourgeois public sphere" emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and enabled ordinary citizens to participate in the rational discussion of public matters, just before the rise of corporate, bureaucratized mass media in the late nineteenth century lowered the boom and "re-feudalized" public life, making public opinion formation subservient to the dictates of corporate monarchs.<sup>35</sup>

For our own era, nothing is now a more recognizable symbol of the decline and fall of American journalism than the short soundbite. Somewhere back in the 1960s or before, it is widely assumed, when soundbites were a minute long in political news, there was a great age of broadcast journalism, but it has been downhill ever since. Rarely in the casual references to the soundbite does it appear that anyone has read the work of Kiku Adatto or Daniel C. Hallin, the two scholars whose research separately demonstrated a shrinking soundbite from the 1960s to the 1980s in national network television news and helped put the term "soundbite" into popular parlance.<sup>36</sup>

It is curious, then, that Hallin does not claim that the shrinking soundbite is a sign of decline. Instead, it is for him an indicator of the growing professionalism of broadcast journalists. It is an indicator that journalists have gained technical control over their medium and that they actively shape the tales they tell. This has both good and bad effects, in Hallin's view. The implications of the shrinking soundbite for the quality of journalism and the quality of our political discourse "are not simple."<sup>37</sup>

Hallin goes further: "In many ways modern TV news is much better journalism than it was twenty years ago." Between 1968 and 1988, TV news became more interesting to watch, it became more active and aggressive, it devoted a higher percentage of news time to covering campaign issues, and it provided qualitatively more serious issue coverage.

On the other side of the ledger, Hallin places the increased percentage of "horse-race" coverage in the news, and he concludes that "it is disturbing that the public never has a chance to hear a candidate – or anyone else – speak for more than about 20 seconds."<sup>38</sup> (How could both issue coverage and "horse-race" coverage be increased? This is apparently because a more highly structured style of TV news increases the percentage of news that fits standard journalistic frames – there is less to fall into a "miscellaneous" category. Also, more sound bites can be coded as both "policy" and "horse race" because journalists increasingly discuss candidates' policy stands as reflective of their campaign strategies.)<sup>39</sup>

Hallin's final assessment is mixed. But he offers no warrant for using the very term "soundbite" as a shorthand for the bankruptcy of broadcast news. The assimilation of his work to a "declinist" perspective has little to do with evidence, a lot to do with the attraction of critics and intellectuals to declinism – and to an anticommercial bias.

Alexis de Tocqueville was impressed by the large number of American newspapers, as were other European visitors. Why were there were so many papers? Tocqueville takes the cause to be the multiple number of responsible governmental units in America. If citizens elected only members of Congress, Tocqueville suggested, there would not be a need for so many newspapers because there would then be few occasions on which people had

to act together politically. But the multiplication of governmental units in each state and village "compelled" Americans to cooperate with one another and each one "needs a newspaper to tell him what the others are doing."<sup>40</sup>

This is a plausible inference but it is wrong. Local newspapers told readers very little about what others in their own communities were up to. Most of the weekly papers in Tocqueville's day printed little local news. Before the 1860s, David J. Russo writes, "there was very little sustained effort on the part of most American editors...to report the news of their own villages or of the surrounding countryside."<sup>41</sup> The *Macon Telegraph* in Georgia in 1831 provided "virtually no news about Macon."<sup>42</sup> In Virginia, even Congressional elections received "only sporadic coverage."<sup>43</sup> In Kingston, New York, the local press did not mention local elections in the early 1800s and did not make much mention of village government at all until 1845. Where there were elections, they were generally without issues. If there was campaigning, no one reading the local paper in the 1830s would ever have known, at least not until 1838 with the development of a stronger Whig party in the county.<sup>44</sup> In the 1820s, when improved mail service brought urban papers more expeditiously to country towns, the country newspapers began for the first time to run local news in an effort to retain readers with something the urban papers could not provide.<sup>45</sup> Commercial competition seems to have spurred local newspapers to cover local news (see "Anticommercial Bias" above).

So what was Tocqueville's error? I call it democratic functionalism, the view that a social phenomenon comes into existence because it serves a popular "need." If it exists, and if people use it, it must have come into existence because people felt a need that it served. What makes this functionalist logic "democratic" is that it focuses exclusively on consumers or citizens as the source of "need."

But, of course, the news media serve the needs not only of readers but of the entrepreneurs who produce the news institutions. A better explanation than Tocqueville's is that the multiplication of governmental units in America did afford one thing that helped support the press – government subsidies. Government printing contracts were a great boon to the newspaper editor. Tocqueville does not mention this. He believed that social phenomenon must be explained by some evident need for it in the population. But the newspapers existed without any popular "need." The country press can be explained not by the demand for news from people with practical needs for it but by the anticipatory need, if you will, that the existence of the newspaper itself might help to create. Entrepreneurs began newspapers in hundreds of small towns in America not because a population demanded them but because the existence of the paper might attract a population. On the same grounds, remotely situated communities with small populations opened their own grand hotels and small colleges.

This was the booster spirit and it helps explain the multiplication of newspapers. The antislavery leaders who founded the town of Emporia, Kansas, in 1857, for instance, began the *Emporia News* within a few months, intending "to create an image of its community that promoted its economic growth." Nearly all copies of the inaugural issues were mailed East, hoping to attract emigrants to buy town lots and make the fledgling community prosper. Like the effort to attract the railroads or to win designation as a county seat or site for a state college, the establishment of a newspaper was a tool of local elites for self-promotion.<sup>46</sup> This was the typical pattern – the use of the newspaper as a tool of economic growth much more than the newspaper as an instrument of political commentary or instruction. Local newspa-



pers emphasized the communal, rarely took stands on local controversies, and invariably avoided criticism of the basic social and economic arrangements of their towns.<sup>47</sup>

A generation after Tocqueville, when the local press began to print a significant amount of local news, it still told readers very little about local political affairs. State and national news was understood as "political" by the partisan editors of the mid- and late-nineteenth century, but local news was community news. In the country weeklies of upstate New York for the late-nineteenth century, national issues received thorough coverage, state politics scarcely any, and notice of local government was "absent entirely." On the local level, readers could learn who was ill or who had harvested their crops. The absence of attention to local political affairs may reflect that town and county governments simply did very little in rural New York. But it may also indicate the belief that any evidence of political conflict would reflect unfavorably on the community.<sup>48</sup> Narrating the local meant preserving its apolitical character.

Democratic functionalism is all too likely to blur into Whiggism, the view that the lines of development that run to the present can be judged paths of progress. But it need not take this form. The view that newspaper-fanned popular imperialist sentiment led the country into the Spanish-American War is not only media-centric but assumes that foreign policy decisions in the national government are responsive to popular desires, even pathological and jingoistic popular desires. The received wisdom about "yellow journalism" thus commits two errors in one, a media-centric democratic functionalism.

Other scholars will surely have different lists from this one. Let the list be enlarged and corrected! That is how writing history gets better – through provocation, discussion, and serious criticism. There has never been enough of this in journalism history.

There is admirable work being done in journalism history, some of which I have cited here. The strongest work seems to be that which is least insulated from other domains of historical research. David Nord has made major contributions to journalism history in part because he is well read in religious history.<sup>49</sup> Michael McGerr's chapter on the press is persuasive in part because it is supported by intimate knowledge of political history; the work of Sally Griffith comes out of a subtle handling of biography, Paula Baker's observations on the rural press emerge from a focus on gender and politics, not journalism; Richard Kaplan's new work is enriched by his strong grasp of economic and organizational contexts of newspaper history.<sup>50</sup> This does not mean one should approach press history only by avoiding it, although it is interesting how much Michael McGerr learned about the press by asking a question about political participation or Richard John by asking a question about the post office.<sup>51</sup> Still, there is much to learn from works that tackle the media head-on like James L. Baughman's, already cited, or Thomas Leonard's or, despite my criticism, Gerald Baldasty's.<sup>52</sup>

In fact, this work is strong enough today so that the textbook mode of journalism history can be set aside. *The Press and America* is a valuable reference tool, to be sure, but it gives no guidance to understanding the news media in American cultural life (where do people turn for meaning?), political life (how do people participate in civic affairs and what role do the media play in the distribution of power?), social life (how do people arrive at

## Conclusion

social identities and associate with or separate themselves from other people and what role do the media play in this?), or economic life (how do people earn their livings, how is wealth accumulated and distributed, and what economic functions do the media serve?). The question of *The Press and America* seems to be: what has happened in the past in this noble profession students are about to enter? That's a good question for the dean and the commencement speaker to address, but the required history course in the journalism curriculum should by now have higher ambitions.

## NOTES

1. Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, with Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America*, 8th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 63. My own copy is the 1988 6th edition; the words in the 8th edition are unchanged from the 6th – see p. 72 in the 6th.

2. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (NY: Harper and Row, 1970), 142-44.

3. The insulation of journalism history from American historiography in general has been noted and criticized for a long time. Ronald T. Farrar criticized the original edition of *The Press and America* (1954) on this basis. See Ronald T. Farrar, "Mass Communication History: A Myriad of Approaches," in *Mass Media and the National Experience*, ed. Ronald T. Farrar and John Stevens (NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 3. (The 1954 edition was written by Edwin Emery and Henry Ladd Smith.)

4. Lance Banning, "The Federalist Papers," in *Encyclopedia of American Political History* (NY: Harper and Row, 1982), 565-71.

5. Jean Folkerts and Dwight L. Teeter Jr., *Voices of a Nation* (NY: Macmillan, 1989), 84.

6. Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic 1783-1833* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 12.

7. Emery and Emery, *The Press and America*, 1996, 201; 1988, 234.

8. Emery and Emery, *The Press and America*, 1996, 201; 1988, 235.

9. Lewis L. Gould, *The Spanish-American War and President McKinley* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982), 23-24.

10. Mark Matthew Welter, "Minnesota Newspapers and the Cuban Crisis, 1895-1898: Minnesota as a Test Case for the 'Yellow Journalism' Theory" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1970). On the errors of the revisionists in exaggerating the power of British propaganda before American entry to World War I, see Kevin O'Keefe, *A Thousand Deadlines: The New York City Press and American Neutrality, 1914-1917* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972).

11. Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Power and the People: Executive Management of Public Opinion in Foreign Affairs, 1897-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 27-28.

12. Rodger Streitmatter, *Mightier Than The Sword* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 81.

13. Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986); Michael Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: The television war," *Daedalus* 3 (fall 1982): 157-69; and George Donelson Moss, "News or Nemesis: Did Television Lose the Vietnam War?" in *A Vietnam Reader*, ed. George Donelson Moss (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 245-300.

14. Folkerts and Teeter, *Voices of a Nation*, 512-17. See Stanley Karnow,



*Vietnam: A History* (NY: Viking, 1983), 488; and also William M. Hammond, "The Press in Vietnam As Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination," in *Reviews in American History* 17 (June 1989): 312-32.

15. Streitmatter's chapter on Vietnam repeats the most absurd charges of the military's apologists – "graphic televised images turned the American public against the war and helped bring an end to the fighting" (p. 188) in pure form. He cites Hallin but shows no cognizance of Hallin's primary argument. See pp. 187-203. In contrast, probably the most thoughtful assessment of media influence in the canon of journalism history is James L. Baughman's *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Again and again, Baughman punctures the claims of media prominence – television's role in the downfall of Senator Joseph McCarthy, including Edward R. Murrow's celebrate broadcasts, has been much exaggerated; television's role in Vietnam, likewise; television as a source of news for citizens, as well. See pp. 52, 114, 96-97, 160.

16. Gerald Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 143.

17. Baldasty, *Commercialization of News*, 123.

18. I have calculated this from Baldasty's tables on pp. 153, 155.

19. Donald L. Shaw, "Technology: Freedom for What?" in *Mass Media and the National Experience*, ed. Farrar and Stevens, 64-86; Donald L. Shaw, "News Bias and the Telegraph: A Study of Historical Change," *Journalism Quarterly* 44 (spring 1967): 3-12, 31; and Donald L. Shaw, "The Nature of Campaign News in the Wisconsin Press 1852-1916," *Journalism Quarterly* 45 (summer 1968): 326-29.

20. James Carey, *Communication and Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

21. Shaw, "News Bias and the Telegraph," 6.

22. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (NY: Basic Books, 1978).

23. See Elliot King, "Ungagged Partisanship: The Political Values of the Public Press, 1835-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego, 1992), 185-87.

24. Elmer Davis, *History of the New York Times 1851-1921* (NY: New York Times, 1921), 218.

25. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 65.

26. Emery and Emery, *The Press and America*, 1996, 181.

27. King, "Ungagged Partisanship," 396-98, 467-68.

28. See especially Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986).

29. Leo Bogart, *The Press and the Public*, 2d ed. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1989), 336-37; Phyllis Kaniss, *Making Local News* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 22-34.

30. Folkerts and Teeter, *Voices of a Nation*, 279.

31. Louis Brownlow, *A Passion for Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 233.

32. "The Journalist's Birthday," *The Journalist*, 23 April 1898, 8.

33. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 139.

34. James Carey, "'Putting the World at Peril': A Conversation with James W. Carey," *Journalism History* 12 (summer 1985): 47.

35. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990). For appreciation and critique of this work, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT

Press, 1991). Calhoun's introduction is especially lucid.

36. Daniel C. Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World* (London: Routledge, 1994), 145. This essay originally appeared as "Soundbite News: Television Coverage of Elections, 1968-1988," *Journal of Communication* 42 (spring 1992): 5-24. See also Kiku Adatto, "Sound Bite Democracy: Network Evening News Presidential Campaign Coverage 1986 and 1988," Joan Shorenstein Barone Center, Harvard University, Research Paper R-2, 1990.

37. Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World*, 144.

38. Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World*, 144-46.

39. Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World*, 145.

40. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 519.

41. David J. Russo, *The Origins of Local News in the U.S. Country Press, 1840s-1870s*, Journalism Monographs, no. 65 (Columbia, SC: AEJMC, February 1980), 2.

42. Baldasty, *Commercialization of News*, 179 (footnote 80).

43. Daniel P. Jordan, *Political Leadership in Jefferson's Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 149, concerning Virginia 1799-1825.

44. Stuart Blumin, *The Urban Threshold* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 126-49.

45. Richard B. Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1989), 63.

46. Sally Foreman Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 14.

47. Russo, *Origins of Local News*, 26.

48. Paula Baker, "The Culture of Politics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Community and Political Behavior in Rural New York," *Journal of Social History* 18 (winter 1984): 167-93 at 170. See also Paula Baker, *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life: Gender, Politics, and the State in Rural New York, 1870-1930* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991).

49. David Nord, "Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630-1730," *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 9-38.

50. Richard L. Kaplan, "The American Press and Political Community: Reporting in Detroit 1865-1920," *Media, Culture and Society* 19 (July 1997): 331-56.

51. Richard John, *Spreading the News* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

52. Thomas Leonard, *News for All* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1995).



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