

economic agenda—much as historians of slavery currently give more credence than they once did to the counterarguments offered by the slaveholders themselves. *Capitalism and Antislavery*, however, is no hagiography of the “Saints.” Marshaling masses of new evidence, it digs down to what Drescher calls the “anthropological roots” of antislavery, and puts in new perspective many facets of a long-running debate. Combining a brief text with copious notes, it should appeal both to the general reader and to the specialist.

—David Geggus '87

**READING THE NEWS:
A Pantheon Guide to
Popular Culture**

edited by Robert Karl
Manoff and Michael
Schudson
Pantheon, 1986
246 pp. \$19.95

Citizens of a free society require a free flow of information—what Americans call “the news”—to remain free. But news reporting today is a much more complex process than the simple phrase “free flow” might suggest. In the United States, not only the press but also political parties and public and private interest groups mediate among various sectors of government and between government and the people. *Reading the News* tells

how journalists—one of the key links in this complex communications chain—use the six “commandments” of reporting (the Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How of a story) to choose facts and shape them into stories that the public recognizes as news.

Wesleyan University government professor Leon V. Sigal begins with the “who.” Brushing aside the well-known fact that most news stories (over 90 percent of them, according to sociologist Herbert Gans’s 1980 study, *Deciding What’s News*) are in the main *about* people, he addresses a more piquant problem: objectivity. A reporter’s objectivity, Sigal maintains, “has no bearing whatsoever on the truthfulness or validity of a story.” Objective reporting simply means “avoiding as much as possible the overt intrusion of the reporter’s personal values into a news story and minimizing explicit interpretation.” Yet to do this, the reporter must rely on “sources”—preferably authoritative—to tell the story. The objective reporter quotes and remains aloof, but his “sources make the news.”

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*’s Carlin Romano tells us that “what” the press covers “is a straightforward empirical question with a straightforward empirical answer: box scores, beauty pageants, press conferences, Richard Nixon, and so on.” But which among the myriad of “bare facts” get reported, and, once reported, rate top billing? Do reporters simply cover what they feel like covering? Do their choices guide the public or

does the public guide the choices?

Romano cites a number of unwritten rules that determine what is news. In addition to the sensational—neatly epitomized by the wry title of Washington reporter Arnold Sawislak's 1985 book, *Dwarf Rapes Nun; Flees in U.F.O.*—the press covers the possible, the easy, and the tasteful. Less edifyingly, it covers political friends favorably and enemies unfavorably: Romano asks us to "recall how many strictly upbeat stories you've read about the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, or South Africa."

It is the public, the people who actually buy and read the news, who ultimately establish the practical, if unwritten, limits for reporters. If "what the press covers is what it feels like covering," Romano observes, it is nevertheless also true that "rebels against mainstream journalistic beliefs don't rise to managing editor."

"Recency," says Michael Schudson, writing on the "when" of news, "is not a sufficient guarantee of newsworthiness, nor is uniqueness." To become *hard* news, stories must have a "peg" that links them to the concerns of today's reader. For instance, during Chinese president Li Xiannian's 1985 visit to the United States, it was announced in Beijing that the government had put on display 70,000 books to help the capital's residents "locate and reclaim materials [confiscated] from their personal libraries during the Cultural Revolution." The story made page one of the *Los Angeles Times*. Yet a year earlier, when there was no compelling news peg, the same paper did not consider newsworthy an announcement that "one hundred thousand volumes were displayed and a third of them reclaimed" in a similar Beijing book give-back.

Schudson, a University of California professor of communications and sociology, worries that hard news about the most recent events tends to "place greatest emphasis on what may often be the least publicly vital feature of media work." Feature and in-depth reporting allow reporters to escape the present-tense tyranny of the front page, where they must often be both superficial and mouthpieces for the government.

The "where" of news—often found only in a story's dateline—rarely gives us pause. Yet in "SANTA BARBARA, Calif., Aug. 20 — The White House announced [here] today that, despite Soviet objections, the United States would proceed with the first American test of an antisatellite weapon against an object in space," it is the dateline—placing the reporter on the spot—that establishes his authority. The "where" also occasionally serves as a hard news subject, as with "The Philippines: Another Iran?," but setting is most often omitted in objective political reports as too evocative. Locations in the news are most often information—where a concert will take place, for example—or serve to orient and involve a reader, as when a local person takes part in a distant event.

"A story is worthless if it doesn't tell me why something happened," remarked one *New York Times* editor. Yet, according to James W. Carey, dean of the University of Illinois College of Communications, "'why' is the question most often left unanswered, or answered with an insinuation." It

is "the dark continent and invisible landscape" of journalism—what readers most want to get out of a news story and are least likely to receive. Leaving aside random, uncanny (often sensational) occurrences, "matters of fundamental importance . . . in the news . . . cannot be treated as secular mysteries and left unexplained. They must be accounted for, must be rendered sensible. The economy and the political system form the sacred center of modern society. With them, we are unwilling to sit about muttering 'It's fate' or 'So be it.' We insist that the economy and the polity be explicable . . ."

The "why" of journalism requires reporting in depth. If, as Carey maintains, reporting is ideally a "curriculum and not merely a series of news flashes," present-day journalism—"identified with [and] defined by breaking news, the news flash, the news bulletin"—is unsatisfactory.

New York University's Robert Karl Manhoff concludes the volume by considering the power of the news "story" as a literary form. While most readers understand that they are getting something more than the facts, few stop to consider "that in reading the news they [are] being told a tale." Each news narrative seeks to persuade the reader that it is the "one story to tell and [the] one right way to tell it." But the form of a news story is never inevitable. It is, maintains Manhoff, the product of collaboration between reader and writer to follow established conventions that make events understandable.

Reading the News is a worthwhile exercise. It leaves one better equipped to frame answers to a number of fundamental questions: What is news? What are facts? What are truths? Can a journalist be objective and factual, and still distort the truth?

But it is hardly the whole story. The news media are just one element in a vast communications network in the United States. Government leaders, for instance, bombard their staffs with memoranda and newsletters, and their constituents with leaflets and 10-second sound bites (radio and TV's "paid political announcements"), funneling their message to the public through parties and election committees. The White House—wanting to be kept informed as well as to inform—conducts almost daily polls of public opinion.

The people, too, speak their minds. Traditionally, the public speaks through letters to congressmen and the lobbying of special interest groups. When Lt. Col. Oliver North achieved instant stardom during the recent Iran-Contra hearings, the senators who were grilling him had to face a roomful of flowers and two stacks of telegrams sent by his fans, while two Californians expressed an opposing view by editing Los Angeles' famous HOLLYWOOD sign to read an ironic "OLLYWOOD."

In the United States, "reading the news" demands an understanding of this larger communications complex. Without it, one can see trees—scraps of news—but not the forest, the broad picture of U.S. politics and society, which is much more than the sum of its parts.

—Miao Frank Li '87