

Lasch, a historian at the University of Rochester, is one of the few authorities who refuse to blame the schools for this depressing state of affairs. The fault, he asserts, lies squarely with the American press. Once the great inciter of public debate, it has settled into the role of mere purveyor of information. "When we get into arguments that focus and fully engage our attention," Lasch writes, "we become avid seekers of relevant information. Otherwise we take in information passively—if we take it in at all."

Lasch identifies 1830–1900 as the golden age of the press, the period when famed editors such as Horace Greeley and E. L. Godkin launched newspapers that were unabashedly opinionated without, like their predecessors, following a party line. Politics during this era was high drama, with public debates, torchlight parades, and massive voter turnouts (80 percent) for presidential elections.

After the turn of the century, however, press and politics alike succumbed to the Progressive impulse, with its emphasis on "scientific management" in public affairs. During the 1920s, journalist Walter Lippmann published several important books

arguing that public debate was not democracy's great virtue but its great defect, a disagreeable necessity to be allowed only when "exact knowledge" did not allow for scientific resolution of public questions. Arguments, Lasch notes, "were what took place in the absence of reliable information." The role of the press, in Lippmann's view, was to circulate neutral information in order to preclude argument.

The rise of a disinterested press, Lasch says, was encouraged by the emergence of the advertising and public relations industries. They put their money where the well-heeled readers were, in the "responsible" newspapers. Ever since, Lasch adds, information and publicity have become harder and harder to distinguish.

Increasingly, he writes, "information is generated by those who wish to promote something or someone . . . without arguing their case on its merits or explicitly advertising it as self-interested material either. Much of the press, in its eagerness to inform the public, has become a conduit of the equivalent of junk mail. [I]t now delivers an abundance of useless, indigestible information that nobody wants, most of which ends up as unread waste."

## Puritan Journalism?

"Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630–1730" by David Paul Nord, in *The Journal of American History* (June 1990), 112 N. Bryan St., Bloomington, Ind. 47408.

It was big news in Boston when Mary Dyer delivered a hideously deformed stillborn child on October 17, 1637. John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts, conducted an investigation. The Dyers were followers of the heretical Anne Hutchinson, recalls Nord, who teaches journalism at Indiana University, and Winthrop was certain that he saw in this strange birth "the designing hand of God and a message for the commonwealth of Massachusetts."

The event may now seem only like fodder for the *National Enquirer*, Nord says, but it contains a clue to the nature of contemporary mainstream journalism. News, he notes, is simply "the reporting of current public occurrences." But how does

one "report"? What is a newsworthy "occurrence"? What is "public"? The Puritans were the first Americans to confront such questions, and some of their answers are still with us, Nord believes.

To Winthrop and his Puritan contemporaries, all of the defining elements of the news "were shaped by the belief that everything happened according to God's perfect plan." News was teleological, so that with proper reporting and minimal interpretation its meaning ought to be accessible to all. Thus, says Nord, "New England generated a kind of news that was oriented to current events, yet conventional, patterned, and recurrent in subject matter." There was an emphasis on getting the facts

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right so that the divine meaning would become clear. Interpretation was almost unnecessary: Almanacs, histories, and collections of "providences" often contained only lists of occurrences, and even many published sermons contained long recitations of "the facts."

Of course, it was not long before varying interpretations of events did begin to appear, and by the time the first real newspa-

pers were started in Boston during the early 18th century, the teleological import of the news had all but vanished. Even so, Nord argues, journalism continued to feel the Puritan influence. "The news would remain event-oriented, devoted to unusual (but conventional) occurrences, and dependent on reportorial empiricism." The chief difference is that, today, "no one knows what the stories mean."

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**RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY**

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*Locke's Lapses*

"Three Approaches to Locke and the Slave Trade" by Wayne Glausser, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* (April-June 1990), Univ. of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y. 14627.

It is one of the more unsettling puzzles of political philosophy that John Locke (1632-1704), the premier theorist of liberalism, was an active participant in the slave trade. Among other things, he invested the substantial sum of 600 pounds in the Royal African Company, a slave-trading venture.

Over the years, notes Glausser, of DePauw University, scholars who have tried to explain Locke's lapse have fallen into three distinct camps. One group dismisses it as "embarrassing but insignificant." Scrutinizing *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) and other writings, these scholars find a virtually airtight case against slavery. Everyone is naturally free "from any Superior Power on Earth," Locke wrote, and anyone who attempts to enslave a person "puts himself into a State of War" with that person. Locke seemed to admit only one exception: captives taken in a just war can be held as slaves.

A second group of scholars, led by M. Seliger, detects signs of tortured logic justifying slavery in Locke's writings. From Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Locke borrowed the theory of "waste land," the notion that idle land may sometimes be seized by people prepared to put it to good use. Thus Locke wrote that victors in war may not seize the land of the vanquished, except that "where there being more

*Land*, than the Inhabitants possess, and make use of, any one has liberty to make use of the waste." By this logic, Africans resisting use of their "waste land" by whites could be considered aggressors in war—and thus candidates for slavery.

The third group of scholars sees slavery as part and parcel of Lockean theory. A conservative critic, Leo Strauss, maintains



*Locke probably coauthored colonial Carolina's constitution; granting "every freeman . . . absolute power and authority over his negro slave."*