BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE NEWS MEDIA

"News and truth are not the same things, and must be clearly distinguished." So, in 1922, wrote Walter Lippmann in **Public Opinion** (Macmillan, 4th ed., 1965, cloth & paper). "The press is no substitute for [other] institutions. . . . Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions."

Such lofty talk was long in coming to American journalism. In **American Journalism—A History: 1690–1960** (Macmillan, 3rd ed., 1962), the University of Missouri's Frank Luther Mott notes that the first continuous U.S. newspaper was the *Boston News-Letter*, founded in 1704 by Boston's postmaster, John Campbell. The weekly did not thrive: 15 years later, Campbell complained that he could not "vend 300 copies at an impression."

Circulation remained small because Campbell and other early editors catered to a tiny mercantile elite, printing mostly shipping news and advertisements.

That all changed during the 1830s. Jacksonian Democracy, with its egalitarian politics and free-market philosophy, not only encouraged entrepreneurs to start newspapers, but helped to create an audience for them.

The new papers—the first was the New York *Sun*—cost 1¢, a sixth of the then-usual cost, and so were labeled "the penny press." They covered "not just commerce or politics but social life . . . the activities of an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society" writes University of Chicago sociologist Michael Schudson in **Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers** (Basic, 1978). In 1830, Schudson estimates, the combined circulation of all U.S. dailies was 78,000; within 10 years, the total shot up to about 300,000.

In the years after the Civil War, a muckraking manic-depressive Hungarian immigrant named Joseph Pulitzer further expanded the newspaper audience. Biographer W. A. Swanberg tells how **Pulitzer** (Scribner's, 1967), wedding reform to sensationalism, developed the newspaper crusade as a way of hooking America's giant new working-class immigrant population on the daily newspaper habit.

Expelled from Harvard in his junior year, William Randolph Hearst went to work at Pulitzer's *New York World*. That served as an apprenticeship. In 1885, he took over the San Francisco *Examiner*, bought by his father with part of the proceeds from the Comstock Lode. Like Pulitzer, Swanberg writes, **Citizen Hearst** (Bantam, 2nd ed., 1963) was excruciatingly shy in person but explosive in print. Hearst took a lower road to success, following a "crime and underwear" recipe. He sent his reporters to hunt grizzly bears, or to fall overboard from ferryboats, or to escort Sarah Bernhardt to a San Francisco opium den.

By 1923, two young men fresh out of Yale, Henry R. Luce and Britton Hadden, decided news was so abundant that it needed to be organized, condensed, and (because dry facts did not suffice) interpreted. Thus was born a new branch of journalism, the news magazine. With *Time* came a new style, notable for its Homeric epithets ("bumper-jawed," "long-whiskered") and odd linguistic shrinkages ("in time's nick"). Former *Time* editor Robert Elson tells the story in the company-sponsored **Time Inc: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, 1923–1941** (Atheneum, 1968).

As the mid-20th century wore on, technology brought entirely new media, radio and television. Broadcast journalists faced a unique problem: People did not buy radios or TV sets primarily to get the news. "You've got to get them into the tent!" CBS evening news producer (and now *60 Minutes* producer) Don Hewitt used to shout at his crews during the 1950s.

One of the first to get folks "into the tent" was Edward R. Murrow, a man who, in his own words, had not been "contaminated by the conventions of print." Murrow's great feat, notes former CBS writer Gary Paul Gates in his chatty **Air Time: The Inside History of CBS News** (Harper, 1978, cloth; Berkley, 1979, paper), was to shift radio news from the studio to the scene of the event—in his case, London during World War II. And Murrow succeeded, Gates argues, because he "mastered the art of *playing* himself."

Media critic Edward Jay Epstein's more scholarly **News From Nowhere** (Random, 1974, cloth & paper) concentrates on NBC-TV News but finds a similar philosophy of news as entertainment.

New Yorker critic Michael Arlen suggests in **The View From Highway One** (Farrar, 1976, cloth; Ballantine, 1977, paper) that broadcast journalists should not be condemned for failing to provide the facts as well as do their print counterparts. Television news, he contends, seeks to convey not information pertaining to an event but the "feel" of it. Television critic Ron Powers concurs. Looking at local TV news in **The Newscasters** (St. Martin's, 1977), he concludes that during the 1970s it succumbed to the underlying "entertainment bias" of the medium.

Yet the harried gentlemen of the print media are also susceptible to manipulation. So says Edwin R. Bayley, who covered the erratic anti-Red crusades of Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.) as a reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*. In **Joe McCarthy and the Press** (Univ. of Wis., 1981), Bayley, now journalism dean at the University of California at Berkeley, argues that it was television, not newspapers, that did McCarthy in, when, in 1954, the televised Army-McCarthy hearings brought the ugliness of the senator's attacks into America's living rooms.

A little more than a decade later, the manipulators of the media came from the Left. "The media and the movement needed each other"—one for melodrama, the other for exposure, asserts radical-turned-sociologist Todd Gitlin in **The Whole World is Watching** (Univ. of Calif., 1980).

But the price the Left paid for exploiting the media was losing some of its leaders (e.g., Tom Hayden) to the delights of celebrity and having other "pseudo-leaders" (e.g., Jerry Rubin) foisted upon it. And when, after the Tet offensive shocked America in 1968, the press and TV turned against the Vietnam War, they ignored the radical Left and shifted to a sympathetic focus on the more moderate "Clean for Gene" (McCarthy) antiwar crowd.

Why and how the Communists' Tet offensive overwhelmed the American media is explained by *WQ* editor (and former *Washington Post* Saigon bureau chief) Peter Braestrup in **Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet in 1968 in Vietnam and Washington,** 2 vols. (Westview, 1977; Yale, rev. ed., forthcoming). Braestrup argues that journalists hastily interpreted the drama of Tet as a U.S. military "disaster" when it was not, and thereby aggravated the political crisis in Lyndon Johnson's Washington.

Vietnam jarred notions of journalistic "neutrality," as when, in October 1969, 500 Time Inc. employees used company facilities for antiwar protests and 150 *New York Times* employees staged an antiwar vigil in front of the newspaper's offices.

Within weeks, the new administration had turned on the press. University of Michigan journalism professor William E. Porter tells, in **Assault on the Media: The Nixon Years** (Univ. of Mich., 1976, cloth & paper), how the Nixon White House distinguished itself from earlier administrations by setting out "to damage the credibility not of a single journalist but of whole classes of them."

But such clashes were not unprecedented in America. Historian Leonard Levy documents the early days in **Freedom of the Press from Zenger to Jefferson** (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). The great Nixon-era confrontation, the "Pentagon Papers" case, is well-illuminated in **The Papers and the Papers** by Sanford J. Ungar (Dutton, 1972).

Post-mortems on the media's coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign indicate that Nixon got a fair shake not because of, but in spite of, his attacks. So contends former *National Observer* columnist James M. Perry in **Us and Them: How the Press Covered the 1972 Election** (Crown, 1973). Timothy Crouse suggests in **The Boys on the Bus** (Random, 1973, cloth; Ballantine, 1976, paper) that political writers are guided less by ideology than by a nose for blood.

Watergate soon followed. The best-known memoir on the subject is **All the President's Men** (Simon & Schuster, 1974, cloth; Warner, 1976, paper) by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, then reporters for the *Washington Post*. Today that book is interesting for what it suggests between the lines, e.g., how late senior *Post* executives were in taking control of the story. By mid-September 1972, when *Post* executive editor Benjamin Bradlee took an active interest, the newspaper had already consigned its prestige and credibility to two worried young reporters.

Edward Jay Epstein takes a skeptic's view of this press saga and others in **Between Fact and Fiction: The Problem of Journalism** (Vintage, 1975). And Kurt and Gladys Lang re-examine Watergate media coverage, politicians' behavior, and poll results in **The Battle for Public Opinion** (Columbia, forthcoming).

Watergate was an exception for the press as well as the Presidency. In **Reporting: An Inside View** (Sacramento: California Journal Press, 1977, cloth & paper), longtime newsman Lou Cannon presents a sober view of the profession in normal times, significantly devoting entire chapters to the biases, limitations, and frustrations of the craft. Cannon approvingly quotes columnist Russell Baker: "The print journalist has a lot in common with Willy Loman [of *Death of a Salesman*]

... living a rather dreary life with the reality of it romanticized by good booze."

Over the last two decades, increasingly sophisticated romanticizations have appeared. Before David Halberstam mythologized CBS, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Post* in **The Powers That Be** (Knopf, 1979, cloth; Dell, 1980, paper), another former *New York Times*man, Gay Talese, produced a melodrama, **The Kingdom and the Power** (Calder & Boyars, 1971, cloth; Dell, 1981, paper), which portrays executive struggles at the *Times* during the 1960s as personality clashes rather than conflicts caused by differing ideas about the paper's direction.

A 1971 survey of 1,300 media folk across the nation yielded an unromantic but useful portrait, **The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work** (Univ. of Ill., 1976) by John W. C. Johnstone and others.

One major task of newspaper editors and sub-editors is selecting what "news" to print out of the information pouring into the newsroom from wire services and staff reporters. In **The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media** (Harper, 1971, cloth & paper), former *Washington Post* ombudsman Ben Bagdikian reports that during an ordinary seven-hour shift, the news editor of a small suburban paper makes rapid decisions on stories totaling "about 110,000 words, or the equivalent of a book."

But editors often fail to insist that staffers do their homework. Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Stephen Hess surveyed **The Washington Reporters** (Brookings, 1981, cloth & paper) and found that they read one another's prose, and not much else. For example, only one quarter of the reporters covering law read law journals, and economics reporters follow only the popular business magazines, such as *Forbes*.

Who Owns The Media? (Knowledge Industries Publications, rev. ed., 1982) asks Benjamin Compaine; he provides details on newspaper chains (e.g., Gannett, Newhouse), multimedia conglomerates, and TV networks. Chain ownership may or may not improve a local monopoly paper's news coverage. Some big chains, e.g., Thomson, are more highly regarded for their cash flow than for their journalism. For all major media, Compaine predicts, slower growth but "substantial profits" lie ahead.

Whatever the '80s bring, old newshands will no doubt continue to quote the definition of news provided by novelist Evelyn Waugh in **Scoop** (Little, Brown, 1938; 1977, cloth & paper), the hilarious satire that foreign correspondents recommend to neophytes for the inside story: "News," Waugh writes, "is what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read."

—Tom Ricks

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Tom Ricks is a contributing editor of the* Washington Journalism Review. *This essay is based on suggestions by George Washington University's Christopher Sterling. See also* WQ *Background Books essays on Television in America (Winter 1981), and TV News and Politics (Spring 1977).*