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Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1974

# JOURNALISM HISTORY

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Journalism Dept.—Darby Annex 103  
Cal State Northridge  
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# The Problem of Journalism History

By James W. Carey

The study of journalism history remains something of an embarrassment. Can it be justified as a form of knowledge, an entry in the curriculum, an activity to which one can usefully devote his professional life? By our behavior we answer the questions affirmatively and yet a doubt remains. Each generation of journalism historians has been dissatisfied with the nature of our knowledge and the forms of our presentation. Writing in a short-lived newsletter, *Coronto*, about 1950, Theodore Peterson argued:

... in many schools and departments of journalism, history of journalism is the least rewarding course in the curriculum. The reasons are various. One is that all too often history is the orphan, or at least the grubby little cousin, who must depend on charity for its care and feeding. Young instructors teach it from sufferance; senior faculty members teach it because they have worked up an adequate set of notes that it's a shame to waste. They drone about the dull, dead past and somnolent students cache away a store of names, dates, and places to see them through the cheerless examination season.

Peterson finally concluded that the trouble was not intrinsic to the subject matter, but in the way journalism historians had handled their materials. He argued Frank Luther Mott had laid down a solid factual foundation for the field and that we now needed "interpretive studies utilizing the factual information about the press, per se, that Mott and his predecessors have given us." Peterson in *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* and Edwin Emery in *The Press and America* have attempted just that: building an interpretation on the raw data using, I think it is fair to say, Ralph Casey's elucidation of the great impersonal forces affecting the press as the spine of their story.

Despite these achievements, and there are others that might be cited, the thought remains that our subject matter has not been domesticated or, to invert the metaphor, has been so tamed that all vitality has been drained from the enterprise. It has recently been argued that journalism history is dull and unimaginative, excessively trivial in the problems chosen for study, oppressively chronological, divorced from the major current of contemporary historiography, and needlessly preoccupied with the production of biographies of editors and publishers. As in 1950, the persistent apathy of student

response to historical studies is offered as proof of the criticism.

There is truth in all these charges, though I think they often mistake the fish story for the fish. For example, student response to history, not just journalism history, has been in decline. This is because the American sense of history has always been lamentably thin and students are drawn, for reasons de Tocqueville recognized, to the more abstract and generalizing social sciences. Our major response to this must be to accept a challenge: the major problem with American social thought is its scientific and ahistorical character and our dual task remains a throughgoing critique of the behavioral sciences and the permeation of our studies and our students' thought with historical consciousness.

Furthermore, the existing critiques of journalism history are superficial; they fail to get at a deeper set of historiographical problems. For example, we have defined our craft both too narrowly and too modestly and, therefore, constricted the range of problems we study and the claims we make for our knowledge. We have, in general, failed to base our work on an adequate sense of historical time, and we have likewise ignored the most fruitful research of modern historians that might serve as the basis of fresh interpretations of our subject matter.

I cannot here deal with all these problems; such treatment I have reserved for a longer work in progress. However, one paradoxical issue can be treated; namely, that the most fundamental failing in journalism history is but the reverse of our success. Our field has been dominated by one implicit paradigm of interpretation—an interpretation I will call, following Herbert Butterfield, a whig interpretation of journalism history. This interpretation, which is absorbed in the invisible culture of graduate school, has so exclusively dominated the field that we do not even have, to mention the most obvious example, a thoroughgoing Marxist interpretation of press history.

Herbert Butterfield used the notion of a whig in-

James W. Carey is director of the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This is a slightly revised and edited version of a paper originally presented by him at the Association for Education in Journalism Meetings in 1973 under the title "What's Wrong with Teaching and Research in Journalism History."

terpretation of history to describe the marriage of the doctrine of progress with the idea of history. The whig interpretation of journalism history, to put it all too briefly, views journalism history as the slow, steady expansion of freedom and knowledge from the political press to the commercial press, the setbacks into sensationalism and yellow journalism, the forward thrust into muckraking and social responsibility. Sometimes written in classical terms as the expansion of individual rights, sometimes in modern terms as growth of the public's right to know, the entire story is framed by those large impersonal faces buffeting the press: industrialization, urbanization and mass democracy.

The problem with this interpretation, and the endless studies and biographies executed within its frame, is simply that it is exhausted; it has done its intellectual work. One more history written against the background of the whig interpretation would not be wrong—just redundant.

Much journalism history is now devoted to proving the indubitable. In art the solemn reproduction of the achievements of the past is called academicism. And that is the term which describes much journalism history. It is not that the whig interpretation was wrong or failed to teach us anything, but it is moribund and to pursue it further is to guarantee dead ends and the solemn reproduction of the achieved. Our historians are so set on this interpretation that they largely rewrite one another adding a literary cupola here, a vaulted arch there, but fail to look at the evidence anew and afresh. We are suffering from what, in another context, Morris Janowitz has called "the dead hand of competence."

Our studies need to be ventilated, then, by fresh perspectives and new interpretations even more than by additional data. I would like to suggest that such a ventilation might occur by developing the cultural history of journalism. In fact, I take the absence of any systematic cultural history of journalism to be the major deficiency in our teaching and research.

I place an emphasis on cultural history because I think we should consider anew the objectives of our historical effort and the materials of our craft. We often think of our efforts as aimed at reconstructing the events, actions, institutions and organizations of the past. We wish to know when a particular newspaper was founded, the progression of its editors and editorial policies, when and how particular technology was innovated and diffused, when particular judicial decisions or legislative acts affecting the press were promulgated, under what circumstance and with what effect. There are innumerable such studies which knitted together into a general history create that documentary record known as journalism history. This documentary record when subject to certain rules of interpretation, forms the positive content of the discipline: an interpreted record, of the events and actions of the past. This is, in general, what we choose to remember of the past.

However, there is another dimension of the past, related to this documentary record, but not simply derivable from it. This dimension we can call cultural and illustrate it with

an artlessly simple example drawn from John William Ward.

The documentary record of military history includes an attempt to determine, for example, how, when and under what circumstances Caesar crossed the Rubicon. But this is not the only dimension of that event and, for many purposes, not the most important dimension either. The cultural history of that event is an attempt to reconstruct what Caesar felt in crossing the Rubicon: the particular constellation of attitudes, emotions, motives and expectations that were experienced in that act.<sup>1</sup> To verify that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is to say nothing of the significance of the event, a significance which derived from Caesar's defiance of a convention giving Republican law authority over the soldiers of the state.

Cultural history is not concerned merely with events but with the thought within them. Cultural history is, in this sense, the study of consciousness in the past.<sup>2</sup> As such, it derives from three assumptions: first, that consciousness has a history; second, that as Charles Cooley never tired of arguing, the solid facts of society are the imaginations men have of one another and third, that while the actions of men illustrate in a general way a certain uniformity across time and space, the imaginations behind such actions illustrate a considerably wider variety. Most people make love and war, have children and die, are educated and work, constrained by the physical limits of biology, nature and technology. But for us to understand these events we must penetrate beyond mere appearance to the structure of imagination that gives them their significance. If most men march off to war, they do so in the grip of quite different imaginations: some march to recover holy lands for their God, others to protect their nations from foreign devils, others reluctantly and sullenly as the exploited slaves of an imperial power. The facts of warfare give none of this information directly, but the significance of military action lies in how it is imagined.

The task of cultural history, then, is this recovery of past forms of imagination, of historical consciousness. The objective is not merely to recover articulate ideas or what psychologists nowadays call cognitions but rather the entire "structure of feeling": "The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular time and place: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living."<sup>3</sup> We want to show, in short, how action made sense from the standpoint of historical actors: how did it feel to live and act in a particular period of human history?

How does all this relate to journalism history? Our failure to develop the cultural history of journalism has led us to exclude from our literature any serious attention to what I believe is the central historical story we have to tell, namely the history of reporting. We have legal histories of the press, institutional histories, technological histories, even some economic history of the press. But the history of reporting remains not only unwritten but largely un-

conceived. The central story in journalism has been largely banished from our remembrance of things past.

Prior—both logically and chronologically—to journalism being an institution, or business, or a set of rights, or a body of technology, journalism is a cultural act, a literary act. The technology of journalism existed prior to news or newspapers. Journalism is essentially a state of consciousness, a way of apprehending, of experiencing the world. The central idea in journalism history is the “idea of a report” and the changing notions of what has been taken to be an adequate report of the world. Because we are a news saturated people it may seem strange to argue that the desire to know, understand and experience the world by getting news or reports about it is really a rather strange appetite. But it is less obtuse to suggest that there is a vast difference between what is taken to be an adequate report of the world by those who queue up before Tom Wolfe and the new journalism versus those readers wholly satisfied with the New York Times. In fact our failure to understand journalism as a cultural form has left us virtually bereft of intelligent commentary on the “new journalism.”

The central and as yet unwritten history of journalism is the history of the idea of a report: its emergence among a certain group of people as a desirable form of rendering reality, its changing fortunes, definitions and redefinitions over time (that is, the creation and disappearance of successive stylistic waves of reporting), and eventually, I suppose, its disappearance or radical reduction as an aspect of human consciousness.

I call this a cultural history for the following reason. By culture I merely mean the organization of social experience in the consciousness of men manifested in symbolic action. Journalism is then a particular symbolic form, a highly particular type of consciousness, a particular organization of social experience. This form of consciousness can only be grasped by its history and by comparing it to older forms of consciousness (mythic, religious) which it partially displaced and with other forms with which it emerged and has interacted—the scientific report, the essay and aesthetic realism.

When we grasp the history of journalism, we grasp one form of human imagination, one form—shared by writer and reader—in which reality has entered consciousness in an aesthetically satisfying way. When we study changes in journalism over time, we are grasping a significant portion of the changes that have taken place in modern consciousness since the Enlightenment. But to do this we must temporarily put aside our received views of what journalism is and examine it afresh as a cultural form, a literary act, parallel to the novel, the essay and the scientific report. Like these other works journalism is a creative and imaginative work, a symbolic strategy; journalism sizes up situations, names their elements and names them in a way that contains an attitude toward them. Journalism provides what Kenneth Burke calls strategies for situations—“strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation and desanctification, consolation, and vengeance, admonition and exhortation,

implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another.” Journalism provides audiences with models for action and feeling, with ways to size up situations and it shares these qualities with all literary acts.

Journalism is not only literary art; it is industrial art. Stylistic devices such as, for example, the inverted pyramid, the 5 W lead, and associated techniques are as much a product of industrialization as tin cans. The methods, procedures and canons of journalism were developed not only to satisfy the demands of the profession but to meet the needs of industry to turn out a mass produced commodity. These canons are enshrined in the profession as rules of news selection judgment, and writing. Yet they are more than mere rules of communication. They are, like the methods of the novelists, determiners of what can be written and in what way. In this sense the techniques of journalism define what is considered to be real: what can be written about and how it can be understood. From the standpoint of the audience the techniques of journalism determine what the audience can think—the range of what is taken to be real on a given day. If something happens that cannot be packaged by the industrial formula, then, in a fundamental sense, it has not happened; it cannot be brought to the attention of the audience or can be presented only in distorted fashion.

When we study the history of journalism we are principally studying a way in which men in the past have grasped reality. We are searching out the intersection of journalistic style and vocabulary, created systems of meaning, and standards of reality shared by writer and audience. We are trying to root out a portion of the history of consciousness.

Journalism as a cultural form is not fixed and unchanging. Journalism has changed as it has reflected and reconstituted human consciousness. Journalism not only reveals the structure of feeling of previous eras, it is the structure of feeling of past eras or at least significant portions of it.

For example, my colleague Albert Kreiling has tried to show how the history of the Black press is much more than the documentary record of Black papers and editors, successes and failures, or quarrels among Black editors and writers. He has tried to describe the Black press, first and foremost, as a record of Black consciousness—its origins and transformation—in modern times. We do not study the Black press because it passively reflects Black consciousness; the press is not merely a source of data about Black social history. Black consciousness is forged in, it exists in the Black press: the arena where Black consciousness is created and controlled by canons of Black journalism. It is not the only place of course: one need not derogate art, pulpit and politics to show that Black journalism does not passively reflect Black consciousness. To study the history of the Black press or any other press is to recover the consciousness of men in the past and to relate that record to the present.

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