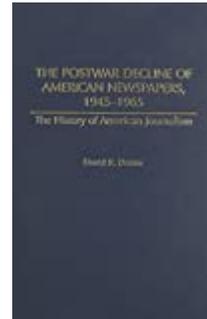




David R. Davies. *The Postwar Decline of American Newspapers, 1945-1965.* Westport: Praeger, 2006. 136 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-30701-0.



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Published on Jhistory (April, 2007)

The Postwar Decline of American Newspapers, 1945-1965 is a long-overdue study of a neglected time in journalism history. Part of the Greenwood/Praeger History of American Journalism series, this book provides a selective overview of the major issues and trends facing newspapers in the tumultuous post-World War II decades. The author, David R. Davies of the School of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern Mississippi, is best known as a scholar of the press and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the chapter on this topic is among the best parts of the book. The volume demonstrates that Davies has a broad grasp of postwar journalism history generally, and it is especially useful in that it goes beyond the standard recital of famous personalities and events to offer some meaningful analysis of the technological changes, shifting attitudes about press/government relations, internal debates about professional standards, and competition from other media that threatened the industry.

The book is organized both chronologically and topically. Several chapters deal with the business side of the industry. Davies begins with newspaper publishers' feeling high-and-mighty in the immediate wake of World War II. Most newspapers had weathered the uncertainty of the war years in relatively good shape, in part because of the volume of war-themed advertising

that filled newspapers despite the relative shortage of consumer goods. The public turned en masse to newspapers to get war news, and, as Davies points out, circulation and revenues continued to grow in the immediate postwar years. Anticipating a sunny future, publishers looked to replace worn-out press equipment and fill out news staffs with returning veterans as the money rolled in. And yet, barely two decades later, by the end of Davies's study, newspapers were in crisis, besieged from all sides by economic, professional, and cultural challenges that ultimately transformed the industry and set the stage for a decline that continues to this day.

Davies's most compelling argument is that this decline was partially self-inflicted. Journalists and publishers misread the economic forces at work, underestimated the competition from television, reacted slowly to suburbanization, and failed to keep up with cultural changes that were sweeping the nation. The first chapter, which covers the period from 1945 to 1949, sets out this thesis and supports it with compelling evidence from the trade press and publishers' convention reports, among other sources. Simply put, publishers were caught flat-footed when they finally realized that circulation was not keeping pace with population growth and production expenses were going through the roof. When Davies resumes his discussion of business trends, in a later chap-

ter covering the years 1950 to 1963, publishers were too heavily invested in expensive printing technology, readers were fleeing the inner cities, and television was stealing advertising revenue. This chapter outlines some of the innovative responses to these forces, including printing more suburban news and switching to cheaper printing methods to cut costs, but generally depicts an industry sinking under its own weight. This general trend in newspaper publishing has been covered before in other books and articles, but Davies offers a very readable and cogent analysis that serves the purposes of this series well.

Another major focus of this book is the changing relationship between the press and government in the postwar years. Davies deals with this material in a variety of innovative ways. Many studies of this period focus intently on the question of McCarthyism and the threat to press freedom it entailed. While Davies does cover this topic, perhaps too briefly, his true focus is the issue of freedom of information. His reading of contemporary sources suggests something that is rarely acknowledged: journalists were for the most part more concerned with maintaining access to government information than they were about whatever threat the senator and his henchmen posed. One example of this is the response of the American Society of Newspaper Editors to Joseph McCarthy's attack on *New York Post* editor James Wechsler. Wechsler, a former member of the Young Communist League, was called to testify before McCarthy's Senate committee in 1953, and the senator grilled him on the paper's editorial policy. When Wechsler asked the ASNE to investigate the incident as a threat to press freedom, the issue was referred to ASNE's standing committee on freedom of information. The organization had no similar committee working on the problems posed by McCarthyism, which suggests that it was a secondary concern for the organization. The book also explains the crisis of professional objectivity that arose around news coverage of McCarthy and the growing emphasis on interpretive reporting. Davies mentions some of the anti-McCarthy voices in the press, but perhaps underestimates the amount of critical reporting that crept into newspapers. This might be due to the fact that he does not place much emphasis on the role of columnists during the postwar years. Syndicated writers like Marquis Childs were early and tenacious critics who deserve to be mentioned. This shortcoming aside, Davies's chapter breaks new ground and should be instructive for anyone

who studies press/government relations and the origin of the freedom of information movement. It is also instructive for thoughtful readers in today's era of increasing classification and obsessive concern with secrecy in the White House.

The book contains a unique chapter on journalism during the Kennedy years. Discussion of John F. Kennedy and the media almost always focuses on Kennedy's apparent mastery of the television medium and casts the early 1960s as something of a golden age of White House/press relations. Davies, however, takes on the issue from the perspective of the newspaper reporters, many of whom were resentful of their colleagues from the networks. He argues that the Kennedy years were actually a low point for the press due to ever-increasing secrecy, Kennedy's favoritism, and the administration's outright deception when dealing with Cuba. To some extent, the credibility gap that eventually doomed Lyndon Johnson's presidency originated with Kennedy. Vietnam, however, gets little mention in Davies's chapter, despite increasing press attention to the region by 1963. Press coverage of Kennedy's domestic agenda is similarly slighted.

The most significant problem with the book simply relates to its size. The author points out in the introduction that the book is necessarily selective due to the vastness and complexity of the topic at hand. Still, the reader only gets 136 pages of text, not counting notes and bibliographic material. So many significant postwar developments are dealt with in a cursory fashion or neglected all together that it is hard to understand why it could not have been longer. Davies wrote an award-winning Ph.D. dissertation on this subject nearly a decade ago, and one presumes that some solid material from that earlier effort must have ended up on the cutting room floor for some reason. What does get included is good, sometimes very good, but the omissions limit the value of the book as a standard reference work. The price, too, is problematic. At nearly a dollar per page, it is hard to imagine assigning this book in an undergraduate journalism history course without causing a riot. And for a book costing \$120.00, it would have been nice if the folks at Praeger had not glued the pages of my copy into the cover upside down. This is another example of the History of American Journalism series failing to fully live up to the expectations one would have for a standard reference series on a topic so near to all of our hearts.

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Citation: Robert A. Rabe. Review of Davies, David R., *The Postwar Decline of American Newspapers, 1945-1965*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

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