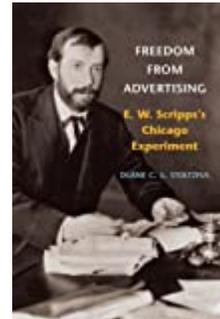


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Duane C. S. Stoltzfus. *Freedom from Advertising: E. W. Scripps's Chicago Experiment.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 187 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03115-1.



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E. W. Scripps and the Ad-Free Newspaper

Weged between an unrealized nineteenth-century dream of Charles Dana and a World War II-era New York experiment called *PM*, publisher Edward Wyllis “E. W.” Scripps tested ad-free newspapers that he envisioned would be the start of a network of reader-driven dailies as well as his “last job as a newspaper man” (p. 60). But Chicago’s reputation for sometimes deadly newspaper competition proved a volatile test market for Scripps’s experiment. The Illinois native’s out-of-town success with newspapers, initially in smaller midwestern cities and later the West Coast, may not have fully prepared him for what he faced in turn-of-the-century Chicago. To paraphrase a late Chicago politician, was Chicago journalism ready for reform? Scripps hoped so.

Despite amassing a fortune from newspapers that accepted advertising, Scripps did not want to be beholden to retailers, especially department stores, and he set out to prove that a mix of news, features, and pro-labor opinion could be profitable. So, for a few weeks in April 1900, he quietly distributed an ad-free penny paper in Chicago called *The Press*. On discovering William Randolph Hearst’s plan to launch *The American* on the Fourth of July, the fiscally conservative Scripps then withdrew from the competition for a working-class readership as bloody circulation wars over newsstand turf en-

sued. (The combatants included Hearst, publisher Victor Lawson’s *Daily News* and *Record-Herald*, and the owners of the *Chicago Tribune*.)

The retreat did not last, though, and in plotting a comeback, Scripps focused on a hyper-local door-to-door subscription strategy. After a few other setbacks, including the unexpected death of the employee Scripps tapped to carry out the secretive experiment, Scripps relaunched his ad-free concept as *Day Book* in 1911. The second try-out lasted until 1917, but it only had one profitable month in almost six years. It struggled under the often contradictory instructions of Scripps carried out by overextended editor Negley Dakin Cochran, who commuted to and from Toledo’s *News-Bee* (one of Scripps’s property, which paid his salary). Cochran was expected to oversee a shoestring staff, fret about the format and the paper’s crusading content, and even tinker with finicky printing presses.

Author Duane C. S. Stoltzfus, a former reporter and *New York Times* editor and now professor and head of the communication department at Goshen College, does an admirable job of putting Scripps’s ad-free newspapers in the context of the already formidable local news competition in Chicago as well as the national shift to the ad-expectant consumer culture that Scripps chose to ignore—at his own peril and profit—to prove a point.

Stoltzfus traces Scripps's idea to do without advertising back to Dana, the former *New York Tribune* deputy and *Chicago Republican* editor who had considered separating and eventually eliminating advertising from news operations in the mid-nineteenth century.

In his thoughtful analysis, Stoltzfus is careful not to offer single causation for the failure of Scripps's experiments. Instead, he sees a multiplicity of private and professional, as well as local and national circumstances that adversely affected the project. The personal conditions ranged from Scripps's aging and waning focus, the delegation of management tasks to his son, the deaths and elopements of his children, and the lingering legal and financial distractions with feuding family members. Professional and business practices that backfired included Scripps's inconsistent advice and instruction for Cochran—his second choice for the position of editor—whose leadership style he alternately praised and criticized. Scripps also feared direct competition and possible price cutting. Ultimately, Stoltzfus notes that timing was crucial and the Scripps experiment was born too late. The tipping point to a consumer culture already had occurred by the time Scripps was launching his publications—and the newspaper market of the time was already in decline (and would soon be diluted further by the competition from the nascent medium of broadcast). Indeed, what the press baron thought of as revolutionary was met with suspicion by a wary public wondering why the publication had no advertising, something readers had come to expect and even eagerly await. Further, Stoltzfus observes, while targeting the often politically dispossessed working-class population in a city of 2.2 million was both noble and savvy, neither Scripps nor Cochran seemed to be able to reach out to that key audience from their privileged positions. The *Day Book* experiment ended in July 1917. That January it had enjoyed its first and only profitable month with a circulation of 15,966 (30,000 was considered self-sustaining).

Acting on the assumption that most historians know little about such ad-free newspaper experiments—other than that Carl Sandburg worked for *Day Book*—Stoltzfus gathered and interpreted material on a rather obscure branch of the Scripps legacy. He is to be commended

for finding something fresh to examine in the media empire. This is no small task among a shelf full of biographies and other books about Scripps, with such titles as *Damned Old Crank* (1951), *Lusty Scripps* (1932), and *Astonishing Mr. Scripps* (1992) that hint at the temperament of the newspaper entrepreneur. Nevertheless, the author provides new evidence on the distant oversight from the press baron ensconced at his Miramar estate in California offering inconsistent directions to a trusted but cash-strapped employee shuttling between two of his mid-western holdings. This book makes an interesting companion and case study of Scripps's guiding principles, such as central management, long-range planning, cost control, market segmentation, circulation methods, and performance goals discussed in Gerald Baldasty's 1999 analysis, *E. W. Scripps and the Business of Newspapers*.

Yet, as good as this topic is, this dissertation-turned-book manuscript suffers from repetition, which may be the result of trying to rework academic structural formalities into a more succinct form. Further, the epilogue, about the better-known *PM* newspaper founded by Time-Life's Ralph Ingersoll and financed by Marshall Field III (1940-48), seems tacked on rather than integrated into the discussion of ad-free newspaper experiments. This is particularly curious considering the chapter that precedes it leapfrogs ahead to speculate on independent and subsidized Internet news models.

Still, just as Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly* (1983) inspired Stoltzfus to investigate ad-free newspapers, throughout this book, the author inserts nuggets of information that invite further speculation if not outright research. Examples include passing references to a proposed Scripps weekly with famous pro-labor lawyer Clarence Darrow as editor; and the relationship between Scripps and the Salvation Army's Frederick Booth-Tucker whose ad-free *War Cry* weekly success was said to have influenced Scripps. Further, one is left to wonder about any dynastic impact on Scripps from his journalistic ancestors, particularly his great grandfather, William Armiger Scripps, publisher of the nineteenth-century *London Daily Sun*, and what role it may have played in shaping Scripps's notions about tabloid journalism, advertising, and advocacy for working-class people.

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