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James Brian McPherson. *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press: The Media's Role in the Rise of the Right.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008. xxi + 311 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-2332-8.



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Media Criticism, Media Power

Mark Williams, a self-proclaimed "multimedia star" who communicates his conservative views on his national talk-radio program, on his Web site, in his books, in newspapers including the *Sacramento Union*, and on the Fox News Channel, appeared before a rally of Tea Party conservatives earlier this year in Boston. In addition to castigating President Barack Obama, political correctness, and hippies, Williams blasted the "mainstream media."^[1]

Williams is not the only conservative critic who includes the news media in his roster of targets. Household-name conservatives, such as Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, Michael Savage, and Ann Coulter, regularly take the news media to task for supposedly favoring liberal politicians and policies. Of course, the very prominence enjoyed by these multimedia stars demonstrates that conservative opinion can be readily found in today's news media. However, conservatives argue that liberal elites continue to control most of the news consumed by Americans.

As James Brian McPherson demonstrates in his book *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press*, criticisms of the news media for their alleged liberalism have been with us "for at least a half century" (p. 3). Such criticisms have gained wider acceptance among conservatives since the 1980s. Yet, McPherson argues, the news media have actually grown more conservative during the same period.

McPherson's goals in *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press* are ambitious. He attempts to chart the myriad changes within both the news media and conservative politics since World War II, and shows how these trends have had an impact on each other. McPherson, an associate professor of communications studies at Whitworth University, argues that conservatives more so than liberals have benefited from changes in the mass media and journalism landscape since the 1970s, and conservative strategists and personalities have successfully used the mass media to build a new kind of conservative bloc for the twenty-first century.

McPherson's historical approach is a welcome one. In recent years, journalists and scholars have attempted to determine if conservatives's contemporary claims about liberal bias in the news media are true or false, with mostly inconclusive results. McPherson's historical analysis of the relationship between the press and conservatism should be of interest to academicians and journalists interested in the current debate about news media bias, all journalism historians, political scientists, and historians of postwar politics in the United States.

The Conservative Resurgence and the Press is strongest when McPherson employs his impressive command of journalism and mass media trends over the last thirty years. He marshals a wide array of evidence to show how conservatives have benefited from and exploited the growth of cable television and twenty-four-hour news networks, the federal government's relaxation of media ownership rules, economic conditions that have prompted news organizations to slash budgets and staff, the declining emphasis on investigative and civic journalism, and eroding public trust in journalists and journalism. McPherson shows that conservatives have been able to capitalize on these trends to bolster their presence and power, especially on the AM radio airwaves and cable television. Mainstream media organizations, meanwhile, have become more conservative, and rarely perform the government watchdog role that many media critics (including McPherson) believe is essential to democracy.

McPherson should be credited for extending his analysis beyond traditional forms of print, radio, and television news media. He stresses the vital work of Richard Viguerie, a conservative strategist who built a massive direct-mail network that helped connect conservatives nationwide beginning in the 1960s. "In fact," McPherson writes, "direct mail, which for conservatives became anything but 'junk mail,' did more than any other medium to build the movement" (p. 135). McPherson also extends his analysis to the issue of representation in newsrooms; he notes that critics from both sides of the political spectrum have charged that a lack of minority, female, conservative, and Christian representation in newsrooms results in little coverage of such constituencies and issues of concern to such groups.

While McPherson's analysis of recent changes and trends in the news media is impressive, he is less convincing when discussing the history of conservatism since World War II, particularly in chapter 2, "Roots of Political Resurgence." In the last fifteen years historians, including Thomas J. Sugrue (*The Origins of the Urban*

Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit [1996]), Lisa McGirr (*Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* [2001]), Matthew D. Lassiter (*The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* [2007]), Becky M. Nicolaides (*My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* [2002]), and Kevin M. Kruse (*White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* [2005]), have offered groundbreaking new perspectives on postwar conservatism. McPherson's failure to engage this scholarship is a significant flaw in a book that incorporates both media and political history, and as a result his analysis of the conservative resurgence cannot be considered up to date and complete.

More important, I believe that the current historiography of postwar conservatism offers evidence and interpretations that might have bolstered or amended McPherson's arguments about the relationship between conservatism and the news media. For example, McGirr's book *Suburban Warriors* shows that conservatives in postwar Orange County, California, digested a wide array of conservative news media. Prominent conservative newspapers in and around Orange County included the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, and the *San Diego Union*. Orange County residents also turned to smaller newspapers, like the *Santa Ana Register*, which regularly trumpeted such conservative values as free enterprise, property rights, and low taxes. "The [Orange County area] media," McGirr states, "were indeed, at times, on the cutting ideological edge of the region's conservative politics."²

I posit that there is much evidence to argue that even before the 1980s, a vibrant and robust conservative news media milieu was in existence. Conservatives across the country were able to access daily and weekly newspapers with decided conservative views; read the opinions of conservative columnists, such as Pat Buchanan, Kevin Phillips, and James J. Kilpatrick, in the editorial pages of hundreds of newspapers nationwide; or, for the religiously inclined, read Christian newspapers, such as Billy James Hargis's *Christian Crusade Weekly*, which offered both conservative viewpoints as well as regular criticism of the liberal media. I agree with McPherson's arguments that conservatives have made transformative gains to secure power within the news media since the 1980s, but I would suggest that these gains built on existing conservative news media networks.

Those interested in exploring further the historical roots of the "liberal media" critique should seek out a

recent article by historian David Greenberg, who asserts that the origins of complaints about the liberal media can be found in the battles over racial integration in the Deep South in the 1950s and 1960s. White southerners regularly criticized "outsider" journalists covering civil rights protests, as well as local newspapers that they felt did not support segregation. These critiques, Greenberg argues, led conservatives nationwide to feel that journalists and their news organizations favored liberal causes.[3]

Lastly, I was surprised by the inclusion of journalist Sidney Blumenthal's foreword, a one-sided rant about contemporary conservative media that I felt was out of place in a work of academic scholarship. (On a side note, both Blumenthal and McPherson cite former Vice President Spiro Agnew's oft-cited alliterative phrase "attering nabobs of negativism" [pp. x, 69]. Agnew actually used this phrase in reference to members of the Democratic Party, not the press.[4])

Despite the shortcomings I describe above, *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press* is a valuable addition to the journalism history literature. McPherson has provided a vital starting point for media scholars interested in historicizing the current debate about media bias, and to paraphrase his subtitle, explore what roles the media have played in covering and shaping conservative politics. Media scholars interested in the ways conservatives are currently using the mass media can also build

on McPherson's work in *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press* by exploring how today's conservatives, including Tea Partiers, are using new media, like the Internet, blogs, Twitter, and YouTube, to build new kinds of conservative movements.

Notes

[1]. See Jill Lepore, "Letter from Boston: Tea and Sympathy; Who Owns the American Revolution?" *The New Yorker*, May 3, 2010, <http://www.marktalk.com/archives.php> (accessed May 11, 2010).

[2]. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 36. Also see 37, 110.

[3]. David Greenberg, "The Idea of the Liberal Media and Its Roots in the Civil Rights Movement," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture* 1 (December 2008):167-186. On the experiences of journalists and newspapers covering the civil rights movement, and the criticism, boycotts, and physical violence faced by journalists and news organizations, see Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2007).

[4]. Norman P. Lewis, "The Myth of Spiro Agnew's 'attering Nabobs of Negativism,'" *American Journalism* 27 (Winter 2010): 89-115.

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