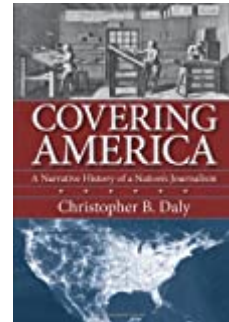


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher B. Daly. *Covering America: A Narrative History of a Nation's Journalism.* Amherst: University Of Massachusetts Press, 2012. 576 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-911-9.



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Commissioned by Heidi Tworek (Harvard)

How Have Our Journalistic Media Come to This Pretty Pass?

On October 1, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* cut back print publication from seven days a week to three, âtransitioning,â as the publisher put it, âfrom a print-centric to a digitallyâfocused [sic] company.â[1] Officers of the Newhouse familyâs Advance Publications told readers they were beefing up what had been the 175-year-old newspaperâs ancillary (and much less than satisfying) Web site, NOLA.com, to deliver news and advertising the other four days. The group subsequently announced the same radical change in publication would take place at five others of its three dozen newspapers. Speculation was, if the change succeeded at those, it would be imposed on the other twenty-nine Advance newspaper properties. Later in the month, the publisher of *Newsweek* announced that that magazine would move to solely digital publication at the end of 2012.

Along with those developments comes Christopher Dalyâs *Covering America* with a central theme of examining ânews as a businessâ (his emphasis, p. ix). It is a broad-brush chronological narrative of the history of the news media in America over the last 320 years. Based

largely on secondary sources, it covers much of the familiar ground of other journalism histories, from Frederick Hudson through the Emerys, with the addition of more recent scholarship and consideration of journalism in the digital age.[2]

Daly is a former wire service and newspaper reporter now teaching at Boston University and he has a knack for telling a good story. In each chapter, he discusses social and political events that were covered and, often, influenced by the media (formerly known as the âpressâ). He also pays close attention to social, political, and economic factors that brought about changes in the media. Where appropriate, he details substantial changes in the physical production of news, from the hand-operated press of the colonial print shop to computerized operations of radio, television, and print and digital publications.

Daly effectively tells stories in each period by profiling one or more journalists of the time. He treats each not as representative but as an outstanding or successful practitioner, and the profiles allow him to show those in-

dividuals in their roles as journalists in the sociopolitical milieu of their times, interacting with other journalists and taking part in journalistic activities of the era. When discussing the establishment of the press in the colonial era, for example, Daly takes the reader from Benjamin Harris's *Publick Occurrences* to John Campbell's *Boston News-Letter* and James Franklin's *New-England Courant*, and then introduces Benjamin Franklin as the central journalistic figure of the time. He shows that Benjamin translated his eloquent "Apology for Printers" into action by helping John Peter Zenger obtain representation from Andrew Hamilton, and he moves from that into a brief discussion of the significance of the Zenger trial.

Similarly, he covers the role of the journalist as political advocate—principally in the person of Thomas Paine—from 1763, through the Revolutionary period and the Federalist era, to 1832. In succeeding chapters, he introduces the reader to Benjamin Day, James Gordon Bennett, and Horace Greeley, and shows the relationship of advertising and mechanical advances, including the telegraph, to the growth of the popular press and of that, in turn, to the establishment of the Associated Press and Washington correspondent Lawrence Gobright's articulation of the notion of objectivity. In the twentieth century, he presents us with, among others, Walter Winchell and Walter Lippmann, Dorothy Thompson, Ernie Pyle, Edward R. Murrow, A. J. Liebling, and Oprah Winfrey, the ultimate high-impact, crossover, all-platform media mogul (p. 423).

Though effective, the length of the profiles can preclude fuller discussion of other important individuals and journalistic activities. While bringing Franklin to the fore, for example, Daly does not mention William Bradford, founder of the first newspapers in Pennsylvania and New York. It was Bradford, of course, to whom ex-apprentice Franklin applied for work when he fled to New York and who recommended that Franklin travel to Philadelphia, where he introduced the boy to his printer son, Andrew. Another Franklin associate worthy of mention was James Parker, who published newspapers in three colonies and with whom Franklin had a profitable business relationship. Nor does Daly mention any other printer-editors who established newspapers in the colonies in business with Franklin. Missing, too, except for discussion of the Zenger case, is attention to the involvement of printer-editors in political disputes that preceded the revolutionary ferment in the press of the 1760s and early 1770s. In those later years, as noted, Thomas Paine is his central figure; Sam Adams is absent, and of the large number of publishers during that pe-

riod, only Isaiah Thomas, James Rivington, and Benjamin Towne rate mentions, and those are brief. For the Federal era, Daly deals with Benjamin Franklin Bache at length and with James Callender briefly, but gives only one sentence to Philip Freneau and not a word to John Fenno or to how they financed their businesses or the role their newspapers played in the political life of the new nation. He ignores the growing business press of the time. Daly also focuses on journalists and mass media east of the Hudson. He does not show the spread of newspapers across the country, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often by printer-editors enticed to a community by developers or politicians to boost it in order to attract new settlers. Those sheets grew into major publications that have played—and still play—important roles in the cities west of the Hudson.

Daly provides an excellent discussion of the abolitionist press, and especially the roles of William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass in their indefatigable efforts to persuade Northerners of the evils of slavery prior to the Civil War. He shows Horace Greeley moving from editorial pleas for compromise before the war to a drum-beat demand that President Lincoln crush the rebellion. Of the hundreds of reporters who took to the field, he focuses on Sam Wilkeson of the *New York Times* who buried his own son, a young lieutenant who died at Gettysburg, and then sat beside the young man's grave to write the story of the battle. Daly also mentions the artists and photographers, whose work would appear in print thanks to new technology.

His examination of press coverage by the prewar and wartime press stops at the Mason-Dixon Line, however. Of the Southern press he says only, "Across the South, many newspapers simply collapsed" (p. 110). But while Northern publications debated going to war over slavery, which he shows, Southern newspaper editors engaged in robust editorial debates as each state faced the question of secession. Once war came, the Confederate government imposed controls considerably tighter than the haphazard censorship in the North. And newspapers published in Southern cities occupied by Union forces operated under strict rules imposed by the military.

Daly is on sure ground when discussing press coverage of the twentieth century, with its two world wars, the war in Vietnam, and the social upheavals of the civil rights, women's rights, and antiwar movements. Against that backdrop, he describes the development of radio and television and the mushrooming of "the press" into "the media," operated by "continent straddling be-

hemomthsâ (p. 395). He details the revolution in the gathering and delivery of news in the last three decades, the effects on the news media, especially newspapers, and the consequences—at least, as far as we can see them now. He shows with great clarity, for example, the pressures on professional values by the growth of media conglomerates resulting in âa cultural contradictionâ in the news business between news values and business valuesâ (p. 396).

And then came the digital era, an asteroid crashing into the world of those behemoths, as Daly pictures the new development. âIf economic dinosaurs like the giant media conglomerates could not adapt,â he writes, âthey would dieâ (p. 435). My New Orleans neighbors who do not understand the reasons for the âtransitionâ of their *Times-Picayune* from print to digital and its likely effects—

and those elsewhere who face the same cutback—might read *Covering America* profitably. They should come away with an understanding of the drastically changed conditions in the publishing business that persuaded the Newhouses to make the decision. They will realize, too, as Daly makes clear, that the change, like others before it, is not the end of journalism, but another phase in its history.

Notes

[1]. *The Times-Picayune*, May 25, 2012, 1.

[2]. Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States, from 1690 to 1872* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873); Michael Emery, Edwin Emery, and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, 9th ed., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).

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