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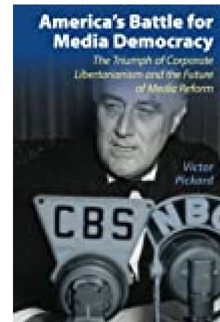


**Victor W. Pickard.** *America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xi + 247 pp. $29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-69475-0.

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Victor Pickard has drawn together two strong currents of media criticism in the 1940s to argue that reform advocates were united by a common call for a public service standard as an alternative to an unregulated pursuit of profit. In *Americaâs Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform*, Pickard argues that business interests and their supporters resisted reform efforts with remarkably similar defensive strategies that often invoked the First Amendment as a shield to deflect scrutiny. The failures of reform efforts in the 1940s, Pickard insistes, normalized the commercial orientation of radio and newspapers since then. Now, the arguments of reformers of the past are as relevant as ever, Pickard contends, as today's broadcast and print outlets face a crisis in the ability to provide advertiser-supported journalism in the interest of the public. Pickard concludes that although the reform movements of the â40s failed they nonetheless provide important lessons for grappling with current issues of media access and the future of journalism.

This compact but richly researched history details several attempts to address concerns about the performance of the radio and newspaper industries. These generally occurred during the 1940s, a period of considerable political shifting, as the reform impulse at the height of the Great Depression gave way to an increasingly conservative mood, beginning in the late 1930s, that was punctuated by the war years and finally accelerated in the anticommunist fervor of the postwar decade. Pickard sees this time as a âcritical juncture,â a period with great potential for change in the direction of policy or politics.

Specifically, Pickard chronicles the effort to establish a public service standard for radio broadcast licensees through work before the Federal Communications Commission. Under the Federal Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934, broadcasters were required to operate in service to the ill-defined public interest, convenience, or necessity, but by early 1940s complaints of crass and excessive advertising and low-quality programming were common. In addition, reform advocates were worried about the concentration of programming control in the hands of large networks, including the still powerful Columbia Broadcasting System and the National Broadcasting Company. Activist FCC commissioners and staff members sought to adopt a clear performance standard for broadcasters and in early 1946 issued a forceful policy statement titled the âPublic Service Responsibility of Broadcasters.â Pickard argues that the document, which quickly became known as the Blue Book, was âone of the FCCâs most progressive initiatives

ever attemptedâ because it made the granting of a broadcast license âcontingent upon meeting substantive public interest requirements for its programmingâ (p. 63). Framers hoped to enforce this standard when licenses were due for renewal by examining the performance of broadcasters against what they promised to do when the license was first granted.

The Blue Book was vigorously contested by broadcasters, who invoked the specter of communist influence, criticized the plan as the work of intellectuals and government bureaucrats, and warned that if successful the print media would be the next target. Indeed, the head of the industryâs trade group employed something of a shotgun approach to discredit the Blue Book as a leftist plot, a criticism with particular resonance in the late 1940s, when red-baiting was rising to the level of popular blood sport.

Indeed, Pickard argues that an anti-New Deal, probusiness shift created an inhospitable climate for progressive politics after World War II and emboldened broadcasters to fight aggressively to lift a ban on political editorializing by station owners. Broadcasters argued that the so-called Mayflower Doctrine amounted to censorship, that it was an example of government overreach, that broadcasters were already providing exemplary public service, and that the ban on editorializing was a violation of their First Amendment rights. In what Pickard describes as a consolation, the FCC replaced the Mayflower Doctrine in 1949 with the Fairness Doctrine, which remained in place until abolished during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. The Fairness Doctrine permitted editorializing but required that broadcasters devote some airtime to issues of public importance and that they do so in a manner that gave the public a chance to hear opposing viewpoints. In hindsight, even that requirement seems progressive, but Pickard clearly sees this as a loss for reform efforts and notes that this resolution solidified the broadcastersâ claim to a right to use the public airwaves to make money free of significant obligation to provide public service.

The strength of Pickardâs book is in tying the radio reform movement to discontent about the performance of newspapers. The daily paper was ubiquitous in the 1940s. In one study, nine out of ten adults reported reading a daily newspaper in the previous twenty-four hours.[1] At the same time, the number of newspapers was diminishing, two newspaper towns were vanishing, and more newspapers were under the control of large corporations, not local publishers. Newspapers were commonly criticized by reformers as too conservative and too much under the thumb of press lords, such as William Randolph Hearst and Colonel Robert McCormick of Chicago, with a personal agenda. Activists from organized labor, for example, routinely thrashed the newspaper press for antiunion bias. Elites also were concerned about the perceived failure of the press to live up to its public service role.

For Pickard, this reform impulse was embodied in the work of the ill-fated Commission on Freedom of the Press, which was known for its organizer Robert Hutchins, the president of the University of Chicago. The commission had the financial support of Henry Luce, founder of *Time* and *Fortune*, owner of *Life,* and later the creator of *Sports Illustrated.* Hutchins assembled leading intellectuals of the day and they studied the problem of the press for three years. Pickard noted that the commission interviewed more than fifty media critics, policymakers, and journalists and took testimony from about two hundred others during its extensive information gathering. Among the many, the commission heard from press critics such as Morris Ernst, the former American Newspaper Guild attorney and civil libertarian who argued that concentration of newspaper ownership was eroding the access to a diversity of viewpoints for readers, and James Lawrence Fly, an activist chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, who argued that the commission should see the newspaper press as part of a whole media system and not in isolation. Newspaper owners had invested heavily in developing radio stations and, by the end of the 1940s, television.

In the end, the commission ultimately issued a set of relatively bland recommendations. The first requirement, according to the commission, was a âtruthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the dayâs news in a context that gives them meaning.â[2] Although an admirable goal, it was hardly a revolutionary idea. Even so, the Hutchins Commission never had broad support of the press, and indeed, Pickard has perhaps looked for too much significance in the gold-plated commission. The newspaper press corps valued freedom from outside influence as an element of professional identity, and publishers and reporters alike generally asserted a First Amendment right to do whatever they saw fit. Further, the imperfect press already was engaged in considerable introspection about its role in democratic society. Pickard argues that the Hutchins deliberation was a significant missed opportunity that could have imposed new public responsibility on publishers but instead conferred self-policing authority and implicitly exempted publish-

ers from greater responsibility.

Pickard concludes with a chapter reiterating his argument that the progressive politics of the 1930s presented an opportunity for lasting change in the American media system. Instead, in both broadcasting and print, democratic-oriented reform efforts lost the debate. The result was a largely self-regulated media landscape consistent with the values of corporate liberalism. For Pickard, a key point is that this liberal political regime made it increasingly difficult to even see the potential of a more people-oriented media, let alone to achieve any reform that would make the media more responsive to democratic ideals. âOnce this window closed,â Pickard writes, âstructural reforms were increasingly off-limits. Commercial broadcasters could feel confident that their licenses would not be revoked regardless of poor public service, and antitrust actions against newspaper monopolies ceased to be a serious threatâ (p. 190). Pickard notes that reform advocates were largely outmaneuvered and that they suffered from a lack of grassroots support. He does not, however, offer significant treatment of why activists were unable to find popular support. For this, readers might want to see Elizabeth Fones-Wolfâs *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-1960* or similar treatments of how conservative groups and interests worked to undermine the progressive agenda.

Finally, in his concluding chapter, Pickard examines contemporary media and argues the decline of newspapers represents a failure of the market and a policy failure, in part due to the invisibility of media policy and in part due to the power of the media lobby. He argues that the media must be treated as a public good, and he cites the development of the postal system as precedent for the government playing a role in media policy designed to serve the public. âThe first step toward undoing the corporate libertarian paradigm is to realize that government has a legitimate duty to step in where the market has failedâ (p. 220). Now is the time, he argues, to establish a public interest norm for the future of digital communication.

Throughout the book, Pickard offers an extensively researched look at the broadcast and print media of the 1940s through the eyes of vocal and prominent critics. In addition to Fly and Ernst, a co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, these included George Seldes, former international correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune,* investigative reporter, and by the 1940s the author of a weekly newsletter critiquing the performance of the press; Harold Ickes, also a former *Chicago Tribune* writer but more importantly secretary of the interior under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and a highly visible critic of newspaper publishers; and Clifford Durr, a successful lawyer who served on the FCC for much of the 1940s and was the author of the Blue Book before stepping down while refusing to take a loyalty oath ordered by the administration of President Harry S. Truman. Pickard quotes from published works, drawing from public affairs magazines such as *New Republic* and general interest and trade publications such as *Broadcasting*, congressional and administrative testimonies before the FCC, and internal deliberations and memoranda of the FCC and the members of the Hutchins Commission. Pickard has conducted extensive archival research and drawn from personal and business correspondence from officials and citizens concerned about radio programming and newspaper bias, among other issues. Pickard also cites the work of other scholars, including Fones-Wolf on radio and labor unions, Margaret Blanchard on newspapers and the First Amendment, James L. Baughman and Michael Stamm on the business of radio and newspapers, and Robert McChesney--his âmentorââon earlier broadcast reform efforts. In addition, Pickard is a prolific author and he draws from many previous publications of his own. Indeed, readers would benefit from a complete bibliography.

This book fits neatly into a body of contemporary scholarship broadly labeled as the history of capitalism, which seeks to account for and explain the origins of the modern conservative state by examining anti-progressive policy after the New Deal. In this literature, well-endowed foundations, conservative politicians, activist business leaders, and right-wing public intellectuals created anti-government discontent and fostered the growth of conservative populism.[3] Pickard contributes by situating this media reform effort in what Paul Starr, in *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication* (2004), would have deemed a âconstitutive momentâ in the developing of US media policy.

Notes

[1]. Cited in Lawrence C. Stedman et al., âLiteracy as a Consumer Activity,â in *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880*, ed. Carl F. Kaestle et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

[2]. *A Free and Responsible Press: A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspapers, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 20.

[3]. See, for example, Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmenâs Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); and, of course, Elizabeth Fones-Wolfâs earlier work, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

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