



On Press—The Liberal Values that Shaped the News

Author _ Matthew Pressman

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Reviewer _ Clay Waters, Masters of Library and Information Studies, University of Alabama

In *On Press—The Liberal Values that Shaped the News*, Matthew Pressman chronicles the transformation of the American press between 1960 and 1980, as exemplified by two of the era's major newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* (NYT and LAT from here on).

“On press” is an arcane phrase for “being printed,” and the book's cover image of a stack of newspapers may suggest a dry historical monograph. But *On Press* is an absorbing narrative that touches on society, culture, and the meaning of press objectivity, without being overly adulatory toward the profession, as the subtitle might imply. It is a secret history of journalism previously buried in archives, stretching beyond the four corners of the daily paper to detail the political and cultural milieu of the era.

Pressman documents the shift from stenographic-style reporting to explanatory, ultimately adversarial journalism, and what editors and reporters thought about it, both those fighting the trend and those encouraging it. Pressman, an assistant professor of journalism at Seton Hall University, traces the decades-long debate over whether objectivity in news coverage is desirable, achievable, or even definable. The battle is reminiscent of current arguments over library neutrality.

Pressman neatly encapsulates how radically the news culture changed by comparing the front pages of two editions of the NYT, one from 1960 and one from 1980. In the 1960 example, “all fourteen stories concerned the actions of government agencies or officials,” (2) demonstrating a “narrow definition of newsworthiness. . . . Reporters did not challenge the people they covered or question their motivations, beliefs, and competence” (3). By 1980, the front-page news hole had been reduced to seven stories, and the product had evolved into an adversarial beast, comfortable explaining to its readership not only what had happened that day but what it meant, with more scrutiny of public officials.

While not conceding the conservative charge of “liberal bias” in his introduction, Pressman does acknowledge the press shifted leftward over the period, adhering

to a “set of values” that “help create a news product more satisfying to the center-left than to those who are right of center” (1-2).

In chapter 1, “Opening the Door to Interpretation,” Pressman notes the objectivity-focused press was shaken in the 1950s by “red-baiting” Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, as newspapers operating under the precept of objectivity felt obliged to print McCarthy's outlandish charges—a example of the senator's “astute exploitation of journalistic norms” (27). Also, Americans were beginning to obtain more of their information from television, radio, and magazines, so newspapers had to offer something different: perspective.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine objectivity from both left and right, as conservative criticism expanded from individual liberal columnists to the press as a whole, a disdain encapsulated in the attacks of Richard Nixon's vice president, Spiro Agnew.

Among the quotes (some politically incorrect) gleaned from interviews, speeches, and trade publications, Pressman's greatest treasure trove may be the pithy memos and correspondence of A. M. (Abe) Rosenthal, who worked at the NYT for fifty-six years and served as the paper's executive editor for eleven. Energetic, opinionated, and temperamental, Rosenthal is the closest thing to a lead character in this long-running drama. Rosenthal is shown trying hard “to keep the paper straight” (60), worrying especially during the heady late 1960s-early 1970s that the paper was focused too much on left-wing demonstrations and protests.

The precepts of objectivity and neutrality were increasingly being rejected by journalists, who found “objectivity” an obstacle to higher ideals. Some called the quest for perfect objectivity itself a fool's errand. LAT editor Nick Williams said his paper strove for “fairness” and “honesty,” while claiming true objectivity to be impossible.

Chapter 4 switches the perspective around to the readers. With the end of World War II, the mission of newspapers had changed “from informing citizens to serving consumers” (132). Papers turned to “service journalism,” like club



and theatre listings. Revised layouts made the paper easier to read. “Women’s pages” were replaced with stand-alone rotating sections devoted to fashion, food, and sports.

Chapter 5 deals with discrimination against women and minorities, both in the newsroom and in the news coverage itself. Among his intriguing findings, Pressman found not much active racism in newsrooms, but discovered that casual sexism endured quite a long time in the upper echelons of the profession, as shown in memos unearthed in a successful discrimination lawsuit launched by female employees against the *NYT*.

Chapter 6 shifts from the left-right view to analyze the battle as a class-based conflict. By the 1970s, the press was seen as targeting Republican-friendly cultures like law enforcement, the military, big business, and of course, President Richard Nixon.

The final chapter takes in the myriad forms of new media replacing print newspapers and brings us to the present “parlous state” of journalism (22).

The 1980s-1990s marked a calm before the storm, with financial stability in a thriving economy. Then came the digital revolution and resulting loss of advertising revenue, followed by the Great Recession of 2007-2009. News organizations slashed budgets. Between 2001 and 2015 the number of people working as journalists declined by more than 40 percent. News outlets fought back with paywalls and “clickbait.”

On the political front, sectors of the press felt presidential candidate Donald Trump’s mendacity went beyond the normal boundaries of politics and felt obliged to react accordingly. Pressman cited *NYT* media reporter Jim Rutenberg’s front-page column of August 2016 that implied news reporting should reflect the “potentially dangerous” nature of a possible Trump presidency (248). Many journalists seemed to agree, an attitude that has alienated conservatives all the more.

Pressman concludes that the key to journalism’s survival is to continue dogged reporting while remaining apolitical. Frankly, the speculation comes off tentative, but after the electoral results of 2016 shocked the press and everyone else, it is understandable that anyone trying to predict the future would tread lightly.

There are some quibbles. The narrow scope of *On Press* (mainly two newspapers) results in an occasional sense of repetitiveness. One would have appreciated more photos of these old front pages. There’s little said about journalism schools.

But those are minor omissions. *On Press* is well-rounded, compact, and feels impressively complete for its length. It should interest students of political history, cultural history, and anyone curious to how the press became what it is today. Like a well-rounded Sunday newspaper, it offers something for everyone.

Don’t Unplug: How Technology Saved My Life and Can Save Yours Too

Author _ Chris Dancy

Publisher _ St. Martin’s Press, 2018. 288 pp. Hardcover. \$27.99. ISBN: 978-1-250-15417-0.
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Reviewer _ Tania Harden, Assistant University Librarian, Digital Services and Technology,
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Chris Dancy is a die-hard techie and a self-proclaimed consumption-aholic. Known as “the most connected person on earth” (21), Dancy used up to 700 sensors, devices, applications, and services to monitor, evaluate, and change his life—from his eating habits to his spirituality. *Don’t Unplug* consists of five main sections covering Dancy’s life from birth to age fifty. He shares a lot of his personal life in the book, which brings out feelings of sympathy, empathy, and pity in the reader. In each of the five sections, Dancy first shares his personal stories, and then offers his take-aways and advice from the experience. Dancy considers himself to have an obsessive and addictive

personality. “By 2011, I understood that if a substance or situation could be abused, I would find a way to do so” (53). As you read the lengths Dancy goes to tracking his behaviors, it leaves you in no doubt that he did tend to take things to the extreme in every instance.

“Part One: Bits and Bytes (1968-1998)” covers from birth to age thirty. Dancy discusses his childhood and briefly describes his dysfunctional family life and how his upbringing influenced his adult habits. He inherited his love of organizing and calendaring from his mother who would calendar all special events, holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays on a Hallmark calendar every year.