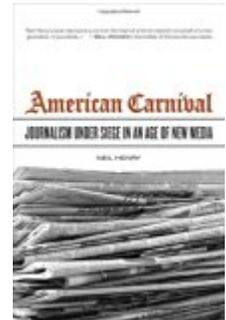




Neil Henry. *American Carnival: Journalism Under Siege in an Age of New Media.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 336 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-24342-2.



Reviewed by Katrina Hoch

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In *American Carnival: Journalism Under Siege in an Age of New Media*, longtime reporter and professor of journalism Neil Henry takes on the perennial task of assessing the current state of American journalism and finding it wanting. Indeed, the book's central premise is that the many different instances of journalistic corruption we see today can be viewed as parts of a whole. The main culprits, Henry argues, are new communication technologies, economic pressures, and sophisticated government spin. These forces, he says, have devalued journalistic skills and standards, particularly the pursuit of truth, and have undermined journalism's role in a functioning democracy in which informed citizens are empowered to participate in self-governance. Together, these culprits have created a carnival—a seductive, glittering, entertaining show based on tricks and deception.

Henry's topic, of course, is not new. The book's contribution to journalism history, though, is to bring together material from a variety of sources about past and present problems in American journalism, thus providing historical,

social, economic, political, and cultural context for such recent scandals as the Jayson Blair fabrications, the Judith Miller saga, and the Bush administration's Medicare video news releases. The book provides a compilation of stories, a narrative that brings all of those stories under one umbrella with a central theme, and primary sources in the form of interviews, observations, and personal experiences. Specifically, Henry draws from his own experiences as a journalist and educator, and from interviews, personal conversations, and e-mail correspondence with former journalism students about their experiences as journalists and their thoughts about the profession. Other sources include poll numbers, popular and academic literature about journalism and American history, print news archives, transcripts of television and radio shows, and web sites.

Chapter 1, "American Carnival," lays out the different types of problems in journalism today. Henry draws from his conversations with his former journalism students about their experiences with the profession, and also from contemporary news accounts of journalism scandals. He details

the stories of doctored photographs that have appeared in various publications; *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller's time in jail and her credulity regarding claims about weapons of mass destruction in the face of Bush administration spinning; and the government and corporate pressure and ethical lapses that his students have observed during their time in the profession. Henry makes it clear that there never was a past "golden age" when journalism was pure and perfect. However, he argues that things should be better today than they were in the past; instead, today there are more journalistic ethical lapses, and new kinds. He notes, too, that staff cutbacks, profit pressures, increasingly sophisticated government propaganda, competition for ratings, and the possibilities offered by the Internet have caused the space between journalistic ideals and practices to widen, thereby decreasing public trust in journalism. Many of the problems, he says, can be described by the word "fraud."

Chapter 2, "Freak Show," details the Jayson Blair scandal—a scandal that rocked both the *New York Times* (for which Blair worked) and the journalism profession as a whole. A young journalist working for the *New York Times*, Blair was discovered to have fabricated many of the stories he had written for the paper, including some for the newspaper's national desk. Henry again provides context for such an episode, showing the long history of fabrications by journalists. He also argues that the other side of the coin of fabrication (sins of commission) is journalism's history of ignoring important stories (sins of omission).

Chapter 3, "Fun House," describes hoaxes perpetrated on and through journalists, such as a stunt by a group called the "Yes Men," who impersonated officials from Dow Chemical and claimed in a BBC interview that the company would take responsibility for the industrial disaster that had killed thousands of residents of Bhopal, India, twenty years earlier. Again, Henry's contribution here is to place this incident and other hoaxes

within a historical and cultural context so that they can be understood more fully. Henry explains that hoaxes have always been executed through the media, but that in past years, they were often pulled off by journalists themselves, while today, they are more likely to be pulled off by third parties on unsuspecting journalists. Henry says that hoaxes today succeed because competition for ratings makes journalists desperate for stories that will catch peoples' attention; because journalistic standards have declined and journalists thus play less of a gatekeeper role; because fast news cycles give journalists less time to fact-check; and because the Internet allows hoaxers to spin more elaborate and believable background stories for their fabrications.

Chapter 4, "World of Illusions," describes the various types of information that today masquerade as news, but are not in fact news. The primary example is that of the fake news reports, called "video news releases," about Medicare that were produced by public relations companies at the behest of the Bush administration and shown, without attribution, during many local newscasts all around the country. Henry faults the local news stations that showed the clip for the lack of accountability and transparency in their response to this issue. He also shows that video news releases are part of a larger trend in the public relations industry of making the information they put out look and sound like journalism, blurring the traditional line between journalism and advertising.

In the closing chapter, "Defending the News," Henry departs from the metaphor of the carnival and returns to his own experiences as a journalist, describing some of the mistakes he made in his own career, and some of the concerns that animate his teaching methods today. He brings in e-mail testimonials from many of his students about the profession, showing that while there are many problems in journalism today, there are still some who find this a fulfilling career and think that it plays an important role. Henry argues that

many of the problems he has recounted illustrate the fact the journalistic professionalism and standards such as truth are declining, and that they must be shored up. He views journalism education as having an important role to play in this process, and argues that journalism schools must teach students not only how to use new technologies, but also how to deal with the ethical quandaries that they enable.

This book makes a compelling case that journalism today is fraught with numerous problems, many of which have long histories. And it skillfully addresses the influence of new technology, media consolidation, and attempts at government propaganda. But its greatest value lies in the several different historical threads that Henry has brought together to contextualize the widely publicized contemporary scandals and to show that these problems are more complicated than they at first appear. Furthermore, Henry's experiences as a journalist and a journalism teacher help make his arguments compelling and interesting.

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