H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jane L. Chapman, Nick Nuttall. *Journalism Today: A Themed History.* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. xiii + 338 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4051-7953-9; $44.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4051-7952-2.

Reviewed by Nancy Roberts (University of Albany-SUNY)
Published on Jhistory (January, 2012)
Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker

Journalism across Centuries and Cultures

In many ways, this lively and original addition to the literature of journalism/communication history shows the maturing of the field. Eschewing the customary chronological order for a thematic one, this cultural history integrates material culled from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. Four major themes shape the narrative: journalism's role in democracy, technology's impact on journalism, ethical aspects of journalism, and the role of the audience. Ultimately, say the authors, modern journalism exhibits four hallmarks: personalization, globalization, localization, and pauperization. An underlying principle is that news is culturally constructed.

Jane L. Chapman, a communications professor at the University of Lincoln and visiting fellow at the University of Cambridge and University College Dublin School of History, teams here with Nick Nuttall, senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln School of Journalism, to craft a comparative perspective on journalism/communication history. Furthermore, *Journalism Today* constantly relates history to the present, looking for the past's answers to today's most pressing questions about mass media and society. These twin strengths assure a compelling and informative read.

"The ultimate challenge for journalism in the twenty-first century," the authors conclude, "could … be to discover the 'precise nature of the correlation between efficient markets and good journalism.' The recurrent danger is that in attempting to monetize the internet news organizations lose sight of the fundamental characteristics of good journalism–the successful integration of democratic values, technological innovation, ethical standards, and respect for audiences. Current trends–multiplatforms, paywalls, PR-dominated news gathering, shrinking editorial staffs, re-evaluation of the 'special status' accorded journalists' information–rather than pointing the way are often contradictory, at times ephemeral, and always challenging" (pp. 313-314).

Throughout, the book enhances authority and interest with many varied examples. As expected, the section on press freedom discusses the Magna Carta, John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644), and the John Peter Zenger case but also emphasizes the development of rights and liberties following the English Civil War (the Putney Debates in 1647, the Bill of Rights in 1689). Tom Paine's contributions to press freedom are highlighted, but so too are those of the less familiar Edward Smith Hall, an Australian who founded the *Sydney Monitor* in 1826 and wrote that it was preferable for a journalist to be "'an inveterate opposer than a staunch parasite of government"' (p. 41).

A discussion of the professionalization of journalism is enriched by comparisons of developments in Britain, France, and the United States. While "in France the profession of journalism first emerged from the 1789 revolution when the influence and esteem attributed to *belles-lettres* and the eighteenth-century *philosophes* passed on to journalism," the situation in Britain was different. There, the authors write, "journalism was able to develop as a profession in its own right independent of politics, even if it did lack the prestige of its French counterpart" (p. 109).

A thoughtful section on advertising, politics, and democracy presents examples and case histories from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy. The authors trace the concept of the media organization as a stand-in for a political party back at least to Lords Beaverbrook and Rothermere in 1930s Britain, with Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (*Forward Italy*) movement, a force in the 1994 election, also rightly meriting discussion. Perhaps the party press in the United States' early national period could also have been noted here.

Important figures and case studies highlighted in fea-

ture boxes in each chapter pique interest and can serve to encourage discussion. For instance, in chapter 6's analysis of the New Journalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these figures and institutions are profiled: Joseph Pulitzer; Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe; E. L. Godkin; the journal *Appeal to Reason*; and Ida M. Tarbell and Standard Oil. In the ethics section, privacy codes in the United States and Great Britain are highlighted and provocative questions raised, including whether any notion of universal privacy can even be contemplated in today's "borderless world" of the Internet (p. 196).

Overall, *Journalism Today* is highly recommended reading for anyone interested in a comparative historical perspective on modern media and society and today's journalistic practice. It will be a welcome addition for students in such classes as journalism history, media and society, and perhaps even an introduction to journalism studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Nancy Roberts. Review of Chapman, Jane L.; Nuttall, Nick, *Journalism Today: A Themed History*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34225

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.