

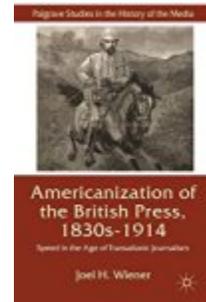
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joel H. Wiener. *The Americanization of the British Press, 1830s—1914: Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 253 S. ISBN 978-0-230-58186-9.

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## J. H. Wiener: The Americanization of the British Press, 1830s-1914

The transformation of the Anglo-American press during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been the subject of many works of historical and sociological investigation. In this new book, Joel H. Wiener approaches this fascinating topic from a widely overlooked angle, namely the ways in which the new values of American journalism – and especially that part of it which came to be identified as “Yellow Journalism” or “New Journalism,” as it was usually known in Britain – travelled across the Atlantic and influenced the development of the British press. Changes in journalism during this period were visible not only in the actual content and layout of newspapers, which emphasized “human-interest [stories], visual matter, typographical boldness and rapid, speedy news coverage” (p. 4), but also in increased circulation figures, the diversification of readership and the gradual professionalization of journalism. At the centre of Wiener’s book is his argument that speed played a significant role in this process of change and was “a key aspect of Americanization” (p. 89) as experienced by the British press. There is, unfortunately, little theoretical engagement with this core concept in the present study, but we can surmise from Wiener’s account that he understands speed both as the ability to transmit information faster with the help of new technologies of communication such as the telegraph and the telephone, and as an underlying quality of an emerging “modern” lifestyle which thrived on timely news.

The book follows a chronological format and is largely based on the memoirs and autobiographies of American and British journalists of the time, with occa-

sional references to specific issues of newspapers published on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the *New York Herald*, the *New York Tribune*, and the *Daily Mirror*. This is not, however, a study of the transformation of Anglo-American journalism based on a systematic examination of the development of newspaper form and content, of the kind undertaken for the American press by Kevin G. Barnhurst and John C. Nerone in their *The Form of News: A History* (2001). Rather, Wiener reconstructs the interactions of British and American journalism largely from the perspective of the journalists and press magnates themselves, be they well-known figures such as Ralph D. Blumenfeld, Alfred Harmsworth, Joseph Pulitzer and William T. Stead or less resonant names such as Joseph B. McCullagh (St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*) and George Smalley (*New York Tribune*).

After a brief introduction which outlines the rationale of his study, in chapter 1 Wiener places British “fear of Americanization” in the context of a broader debate about the role of the press and its connection with literature and social status in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States. Using examples from men of letters such as Matthew Arnold, Alexander Kinglake, Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, he documents the extent to which British writers came to associate American journalism (and America, for that matter) with commercialism, mediocrity and “the unfettered pursuit of news” (p. 15). As Wiener points out, a common American response to such evaluations was to contrast the democratic and representative character of the American press with the hierarchical and class-conscious character of its British

counterpart. Chapter 2 examines comparatively the beginnings of press sensationalism in the United States and Britain, highlighting the role of cheap serialized fiction and illustrated journalism, as well as the importance of popular politics in the development of the penny press. Wiener discusses the contribution to journalism of Benjamin Day (*The Sun*) and James Gordon Bennett (*New York Herald*), the former particularly in the field of advertising and popular, local news coverage, and the latter in the field of investigative reporting and illustrated journalism. Chapter 3 focuses on the expansion of the daily press in both countries, as enabled by technological innovations in the form of rotary presses, railways and telegraphs, but also on the mid-nineteenth century “revolution” in American journalism which rendered the distinction between “news” and “opinion” conspicuously relevant, and led to increased interest in “sensational” news and the emergence of reporters who relentlessly pursued it. As chapter 4 points out, war was an important stimulus in these developments. Wiener contrasts the activity of an earlier generation of British “special correspondents” such as William Howard Russell, whose letters of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny were infused with literary elements and who was generally “sceptical of technological innovation” (p. 85), with the “frenzied” reporting of the Civil War by American journalists who emphasized speed even at the expense of accuracy. Chapter 5 documents further the expansion of the press by focusing in particular on changes in newspaper format, as well as the increased importance of advertising and street sales. Wiener observes that during the 1870s investigative journalism in Britain lacked the boldness and specificity of its American counterpart, a fact he ascribes to the United States’ “less restrictive legal system” and a “more aggressive public culture” which made the boundaries between private and public domains more flexible (pp. 115–116). Chapter 6 documents Anglo-American interaction in the field of journalism by discussing how a handful of transnational journalists facilitated the circulation of journalistic ideas and practices, in particular in the field of interviewing and the reporting of (political) gossip. The Americans George Smalley, who acted as the London correspondent of the *New York Tribune* for almost three decades, and Ralph D. Blumenfeld, who became the editor of the *Daily Express*, are among the examples discussed here. The last three chapters cover the period from the 1880s until the beginning of WWI, a time when the New Journalism came into its own through the activity of famous men like Pulitzer, Stead, William R. Hearst and Harmsworth. Here again, technological innovation – the invention of the linotype,

the typewriter and the telephone – combined with human initiative to produce a particular style of reporting which emphasized “human interest,” and lively, speedy coverage, but also to facilitate the mass circulation of newspapers, the increased concentration of press ownership, and the syndication of newspapers. Finally, this was also a period of emerging professional consciousness which manifested itself, among others, in an increased interest in journalism education.

Wiener’s book is an engaging account of a transformative period in the history of the press on both sides of the Atlantic which weaves together into a coherent narrative an impressive number of writings by individuals who witnessed these transformations firsthand. One feels, however, that his choice of methodology begs questions about the actual reliability of journalists’ memoirs as historical sources, an issue with which the author fails to engage. In this connection, Mark Hampton’s point that “elite critiques of the New Journalism [in Victorian and Edwardian Britain] said more about their proponents’ own social anxieties than they did about actual changes in the character of the press,” is particularly relevant Mark Hampton, *Rethinking the ‘New Journalism,’ 1850s–1930s*, in: *Journal of British Studies* 43 (2004), p. 287. Wiener’s choice of method effaces the complexity of nineteenth-century Anglo-American journalism. The book would have benefitted from a more thorough and systematic examination of newspaper content, with due attention paid to differences between the urban and provincial press, as well as the daily and the periodical press, particularly in regard to the importance of “timeliness” as a news value. In the American case, a more nuanced discussion of the ways in which the development of the New Journalism was connected to particular urban environments of the American North, as well as the ways in which New Journalism drew on American fiction and coexisted with other types of journalism, including partisan journalism, would have been useful. Finally, there is little consideration of the role of news agencies in generating change, both at the level of news distribution and news writing, which is surprising for a book that advocates the centrality of speed in the transformation of Anglo-American journalism. In particular, Wiener’s furtive treatment of Reuters leads him to underestimate the importance of European news agencies in shaping the language of nineteenth-century journalism and to speak unconvincingly about an “Americanized news language of the wire agencies” characterized, among others, by brevity and factuality (p. 156). For example, the contrast between what he regards as an American prefer-

ence for speedy coverage (as facilitated by electric telegraphy) and the descriptive, narrative style of reporting of such British correspondents like Russell, probably tells us more about the ways in which nineteenth-century journalists responded to new technologies of communication than about methods of reporting which were specifically British or American.

Overall, this is a stimulating book which furthers our

understanding of how nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British and American journalists perceived and responded to contemporary changes in their field of work. Rather than an analysis of the unilateral influence of the American press on its British counterpart, as the title would seem to suggest, the book might be more accurately described as an account of the interaction and mutual influence of British and American journalism as reflected in the narratives of some of its practitioners.

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