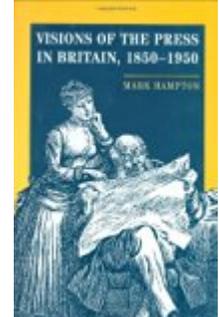


Mark Hampton. *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. ix + 213 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02946-2.



Reviewed by Michelle Tusan

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Visions of the Press engages with the important issue of the relationship between democratic political culture and the press. This timely work gives voice to the elites who contemplated the effects of a changing world where newspapers increasingly came to serve as the intermediaries between the British people and their government. Arranged chronologically, the book reconstructs one hundred years of debates between journalists, intellectuals, and newspaper proprietors over the role of the press that first started in the Victorian period. One of the strengths of this book is the way in which Mark Hampton traces key historiographical debates in press history. The non-specialist reader looking to get up to speed on key debates in the field of media studies will find chapter 1, "The Press in Britain, 1850-1950," extremely useful as it provides a broad chronological sweep of the history of the press.

For media historians, Hampton offers a new take on a familiar story. The rise of a free and unfettered press during the mid-nineteenth century provides the point of departure for understanding how contemporaries understood the press as a vi-

tal part of British political culture. Although the book goes up to 1950, it is the story of the Victorian and Edwardian press that occupies most of the narrative. This period, according to Hampton, witnessed the birth of two competing ideals of the press: the educational and the representative model. During the mid-nineteenth century, critics posited that the press should strive to educate citizens in order to help them make informed political judgments. By the late nineteenth century this ideal was gradually replaced by the belief in a less rational citizenry that needed the guidance of journalists to "represent" them in the public sphere.

This interpretive framework enables Hampton to reconsider the press as an agent of democratic change. Chapter 2, "Imagining the Press," historicizes debates over the "celebrated" value of newspapers in mid-Victorian society. In short, critics attributed great power to the press as tool for "education, moral uplift, 'elevation,' and influence" (p. 49). By the early twentieth century, the realities of a "mass society" transformed the way elites understood the role of the press in society.

The advent of the New Journalism played a crucial role in the shift from a press that educates to one that claimed to represent the people as the "Fourth Estate." Here the elite biases of the voices in this study provide a point of entry into intellectual debates over the result of nineteenth-century electoral reforms. Could the masses be trusted to make informed political decisions? The response of nineteenth-century social critics to this question, according to Hampton, revealed a "pessimism about the possibilities of integrating the 'masses' into a cohesive politics by public discussion" (p. 107).

By the mid-twentieth century, the rise of press conglomerates and increased competition for readers resulted in a further distancing of the press from the "educational" ideal. European fascism also changed the way elites thought about the role of the press in British political life. The question asked by critics during the first half of the twentieth century, namely what kind of press does a liberal democracy require to function successfully, drives Hampton's own analysis in chapter 5, "Persuasion or Propaganda." As in the preceding chapters, great power is attributed to the role of the press in fostering and maintaining democratic institutions. This raises the issue of whether or not the events of the twentieth century and structural changes within the newspaper business worked together to bring an end to early Victorian optimism that understood the press as central to democratic political culture. Here a discussion of new forms of media such as the radio and institutions such as the BBC would have helped to contextualize the shifts in thinking about the press during this period.

In the end, Hampton's analysis offers a sobering view of the process of democratization during the nineteenth century. Rather than an expanding electorate engaged in rational public debate as imagined by thinkers like John Stuart Mill, the new commercialized climate of the press resulted in a passive citizenry unable (or unwilling?) to

participate in government. By placing the press at the center of historical inquiry (Hampton goes as far as to assert that the press itself should be considered an analytical "category"), *Visions of the Press* argues that the voices of elites shaped the perception of the press and thus its function. This focus on one narrow body of discourse limits the scope of the study and ultimately its conclusions. How did readers react to these models? The class biases of these sources elide the potential range of responses that marginalized groups such as women and the working classes had to these shifts. It is hard to imagine the context for these concerns by elites without a clearer sense of how these debates over the democratization of culture played out in the wider society.

In an era when the value of newspapers as a vehicle for promoting democracy is again being debated, Hampton's book gives the reader much food for thought. His epilogue analyzes the first Royal Commission on the Press held after WWII and raises important questions regarding the future of print media. The rise of a commercial press held promise in terms of providing access to the public sphere for marginalized voices in the community. At the same time, the search for profits and worries over readership, as Hampton rightly points out, have limited the press's role as a political medium. Debates over media content and bias continue today. This is particularly true in considering the value of newspapers as leaders of public opinion and "representatives of the people." As Hampton reveals, this question of the appropriate role of the press in democratic societies has had a long and problematic history.

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