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**James Brian McPherson.** *Journalism at the End of the American Century, 1965-Present.* Westport: Praeger, 2006. xii + 241 pp. $139.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-313-31780-4.


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James Brian McPherson, associate professor of communication studies at Whitworth College, has the hardest job in Praeger's History of American Journalism series--covering a period we are still living through and digesting. Yet, he has managed to produce a clear timeline across this fast-moving period that will benefit future scholars. Each volume in Praeger's series "is intended to provide a coherent perspective on a major period, [and] to facilitate further research in the field" (pp. vii-viii). McPherson's perspective is that American news journalism today is "pervasive, entertaining and mistrusted" (p. ix). He develops this less-than-contentious thesis through eight broadly chronological chapters, each of which "covers a general theme that became prominent during the period" (p. x). The source material for his synthesis--the journalistic trade press and academic studies of the news--creates a slightly claustrophobic sense of isolation from wider historiographical currents.

In the first chapter, "The Press and Social Battles," McPherson examines the Vietnam War, civil rights movement, and race riots of the 1960s, revealing the press as followers of social mores rather than as leaders. Chapter 2, "New Kinds of News Media," traces the rise of TV, underground press, arrival of PBS and NPR in 1967, improved newspaper layout, *USA Today* as the first national paper, CNN, and satellite technology's mixed impact on the quality of journalism. (The author covers the Internet in a later chapter.) In "The Press Glory Years," McPherson shows how the path to the summit of 1970s investigative journalism was cleared by such court rulings as the 1964 *New York Times v. Sullivan* case, making libel harder to prove, and the 1966 Freedom of Information Act, all encouraging a more fearless media. Commercially, this style of reporting (aided by early computers) may have been an attempt by newspapers to carve out a niche as TV news became more popular and more extensive. With the Pentagon Papers and Watergate, the press reached "perhaps its high point in terms of credibility and excitement during the 1970s," according to McPherson (p. 47).

The next chapter, "Backlash: The Press under Attack," describes how credibility was soon lost.

"As the news media gained influence, they also drew more criticism. The press had become a recognizable authoritative institution, and Americans had learned, largely from the news media, not to place too much trust in social institutions" (p. 66). McPherson believes key factors in this loss of credibility were faked stories, increasingly negative coverage, and a move from description to interpretation.

"That's Entertainment" takes on a largely disapproving view of the growth of "info-tainment." McPherson acknowledges Ronald Reagan's media mastery in this shift. A chapter entitled "Business" relates how 1980s turbo-capitalism affected media companies, with buyouts, consolidation, and joint operating agreements between rival city newspapers, alongside broadcasting deregulation. None of this appeared to improve the quality of the journalism, as the next chapter, "More Content than Context," shows. McPherson argues that reports about Iraqi troops hurling premature babies from hospital incubators and other dubious atrocity stories, circulated by public relations company Hill and Knowlton and lapped up by the media, led to the 1991 Gulf War. Far away at the grassroots, civic journalism and the Internet attempted to reconnect the producers and consumers of news, locally and globally.

McPherson covers the last ten years of the period, from the mid-1990s to 2005, in "Return to Social Conflict." Coverage of the Bill Clinton presidency and of the September 11 outrage are high points, but outnumbered by the low points: the confusion of the 2000 presidential election predictions; unquestioningly patriotic reporting of the Patriot Act; and spurious links between Iraq, Al-Qaida, and weapons of mass destruction. The final chapter, "Reflections on American Journalism, 1965-2005," summarizes the period while bringing in new material, and is followed by a discursive bibliographic essay, including a four-page *précis* of six schools of interpretation identified by James Startt and David Sloan in their *Historical Methods and Mass Communication*, the only significant mention of theory in the book. The writing style is fluent in a reporterly way, although a little more humor and argument would have leavened this loaf of solid fact.

McPherson, a journalist turned historian, is aware of the pitfalls of contemporary history, admitting that "most of the events involved occurred too recently for much of the reflection that should go into the 'social construction' that comprises any history" (p. 204). Indeed, the title of chapter 7, "More Content than Context," might be a fair verdict on this book, with its focus on the news itself rather than how it was reported or why. While the amount of detail is impressive, the effect is like reading forty years of the *Columbia Journalism Review* in one sitting. The word "also" appears in the first line of many paragraphs, revealing the difficulty of turning such recent events into a connected narrative.

David Paul Nord's *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (2001) has shown how the reception of journalism can illuminate its study and how such a focus can place the social institutions of news in their wider context. More about the wider economic, political, social, and cultural structures within which journalism operates would have made McPherson's book more useful to academic disciplines outside journalism history.

Perhaps more important, a work of synthesis should still be prepared to challenge myths. Such generalizations as "Many stories ... went from being primarily descriptive to primarily interpretive" (p. 75), "The news media continued to lose credibility" (p. 77), or "Sex and violence became journalistic staples, regardless of relevance to readers or viewers' lives" (p. 88) cry out for quantitative evidence and a longer view. In fact, more figures on circulation, ratings, ownership, and content would have added weight to McPherson's arguments. The frequent mention of Pulitzer Prizes leaves the mythos of "distinguished" jour-

nalism unquestioned and isolated from larger forces that created the Pulitzer Prize categories. From where did late twentieth-century American journalism come?

There are less significant omissions, some perhaps inevitable in a short book. Its title nods to the global dominance of the United States in the twentieth century, but there are no international comparisons. Neither is there clear differentiation between "national" media and regional and local outlets, nor any discussion of the significance of *USA Today*, syndication, or the geography of TV networks. McPherson believes that news history is best done from within university journalism and communication departments rather than history departments (pp. 202-203). Some might feel that this book supports the opposite view. That said, this pioneering foray into the most recent period of news journalism provides a solid chronology for undergraduates--though, at nearly $140, the price could be a problem--and a wealth of detail no future historian will be able to ignore.