Narrating Media History offers historians a useful road map for the way forward in modern communications studies. Based on James Curran’s seminal work, Media and Power (2002), the essays in this collection place themselves in direct conversation with the concepts and ideas that currently shape the field. The central theme of the work revolves around Curran’s notion that media history should be understood as a series of competing narratives that seek resolution in a far-reaching synthesis. Divided into seven sections, each containing two essays apiece, the work is organized around Curran’s “taxonomy” of media narrative structures: liberalism, feminism, populism, nationalism, libertarianism, radicalism, and technological determinism. Interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse, the essays in this collection attempt to bridge the divide in media studies between history, sociology, literary studies, and political science.

One of Curran’s key contributions to media studies, a field that he helped found almost thirty years ago, is his insistence on the centrality of history. Curran’s opening essay, “Narratives of Media History Revisited,” restates his nuanced analysis of the role of media in modern societies: the press does not represent a democratizing force on its own but can and has in the past served a democratic purpose. Here Curran proposes that media historians focus on “construct(ing) an alternative synthesis of the seven narratives” that he outlines in the essay (p. 17). Curran uses his role as interlocutor to provide food for thought for media critics looking to incorporate methods from the social sciences and humanities. His goal: “to advance a tradition of media history that seeks ambitiously to situate historical investigation of the media in a wider societal context” (p. 20).

Mark Hampton’s “Renewing the Liberal Tradition” opens the section on the liberal narrative by successfully attempting to nuance a narrative that questions the democratic potential of the press after the abolition of the so-called taxes on knowledge in the 1850s. He characterizes his critique as a “post-radical liberal narrative of media history” (p. 26), concluding quite rightly that the press does fulfill the liberal ideal of a rational public sphere, however “imperfectly” (p. 34). Hugh Chignell offers another qualified endorsement of understanding the role of the media in terms of a liberal narrative in “Change and Reaction in BBC Current Affairs Radio, 1928–1970.” The BBC, for Chignell, has historically served both a populist and elitist function, a diversity that he considers a strength. Both of these essays, with important qualifications, revive the case for the central role played by the media in furthering democratic discourse.

The feminist critique in media studies, ignored by Curran in his initial formulation, finds expression in a pair of essays that attempt to insert women’s history into media studies.[1] For Curran a separate chronology which centers on a fundamental critique of patriarchy rather than the advent of gender as a category of historical analysis gives shape to the feminist narrative. Michael Bailey interestingly traces how the radio
becomes part of the home landscape by analyzing the prescriptive nature of many early BBC programs in "The Angel in the Ether: Early Radio and the Constitution of the Household." Though informative from the perspective of women’s history, a more nuanced look at the category of gender would have enhanced Bailey’s analysis as would have a clearer attempt to problematize the 1930s as a period of changing gender expectations. David Deacon in “‘Going to Spain with the Boys’: Women Correspondents and the Spanish Civil War” uses a similar methodology in his study of Spanish Civil War women journalists, where he explores the contradiction of women’s high profile/low status as war correspondents during the 1930s.

The continued centrality of the liberal narrative in media history is demonstrated most clearly by the essays in the sections on populist and libertarian narratives. Stefan Schwarzkopff argues that advertising does not undercut a liberal tradition but rather if smartly applied can help foster it in his essay, “‘A Moment of Triumph in the History of the Free Mind?’ British and American Advertising Agencies’ Responses to the Introduction of Commercial Television in the United Kingdom.” Su Holmes’s “‘Outrageously Bad Taste’: The BBC and the Controversy of ‘This is your Life’ in the 1950s,” uses a case study approach to interrogate populist forms of media culture that foster an inclusivist culture. Jeffrey Milland offers a further critique of elitist notions of media by questioning the paternalist proclivity of British broadcasting in furthering liberal ideals in “The Pilkington Report: The Triumph of Paternalism.”

No analysis of the place of liberalism in media would be complete without a consideration of the problem of censorship. Adrian Bingham’s “‘A Stream of Pollution through Every Part of the Country? ’: Morality, Regulation and the Modern Popular Press” offers an overview of the problem of censorship in British media by using representative examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to describe the tension between liberal notions of freedom of the press and the marketplace and the moralizing arguments of the elite. Here a tenuous balance is found between press freedom and concerns over public morality through self-regulating media that pervaded British journalism after the 1850s.

The broadening of media studies beyond a myopic analysis of the form and function of communication in modern society is evidenced in the attempt to understand national identity through the lens of print and broadcast media. Using Benedict Anderson’s idea of the imagined community as a starting point, this narrative maintains that national media has been “the main vehicle for popular British nationalism” starting in the early nineteenth century (p. 139). In an era of devolution it is appropriate that both chapters in this section do not deal with England but rather consider the cases of Wales and Scotland. Jamie Medhurst’s “Television in Wales, c. 1950-70” traces the close relationship between broadcasting and national identity by chronicling the travails of attempts to produce quality regional content for Welsh viewers. Daniel Day’s “‘Nation Shall Speak Peace unto Nation’: The BBC and the Projection of a New Britain, 1967–82” argues that the BBC participated in constructing a more polyglot vision of Britishness that took into account regionalism in the face of rising nationalist challenges in Scotland and Wales in the postwar period. Day concludes that media scholars should pay more attention to “the Corporation’s considerable role in reflecting the diversity of British life, not simply its role in homogenizing it” (p. 165).

The penultimate section of the book, “Radical Narratives,” offers a potent critique of the liberal tradition in media studies. Pessimistic and polemical, the radical critique holds that instead of freeing us from isolation, the media contributed to an increase in social fragmentation. As Graham Murdock and Michael Pickering conclude in "The Birth of Distance: Communications and Changing Conceptions of Elsewhere," by the twentieth century technologies like the telegraph and photography emerged as “integral to increasing social control, objectification and stereotyping” (p. 178). Julian Petley in “What Fourth Estate?” starts tellingly with William Cobbett’s 1807 comparison of the press to the oppressor of the English people. The final section of the essay “The Dance of Death for Democracy” offers a stinging critique of Rupert Murdoch’s close relationship with Whitehall. Curran’s critique of the approach of the Toronto School of media studies that famously declared “the medium is the message” comes under scrutiny in the final section on “technological determinism” that attempts to rehabilitate technology as a force for good in easing human communication.

The clear purpose of the text, to engage James Curran’s thesis on media narrative, is reinforced throughout by what some might consider an overly structured narrative which makes the book conducive to undergraduate teaching. Overall, the ideas presented in the text can be engaged on a number of levels. Historians, it seems, can no longer afford to ignore the significance of media studies to their discipline.
Note

[1]. Maria DiCenzo offered an important critique of the failure of Curran’s analysis to take into account feminist contributions to media history. “Feminist Media and History: A Response to James Curran,” *Media History*, 10, no. 1: 43–49.

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