

H-Net Reviews

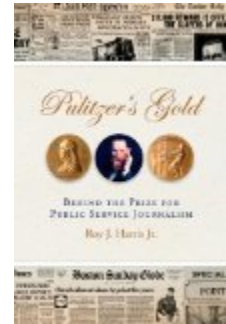
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roy J. Harris. *Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010. 488 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8262-1891-9.

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Behind the Profession's Top Prize

The economic crisis facing the newspaper industry and the rise of infotainment have triggered fears for the welfare of the kind of journalism necessary for a well-functioning democracy. But while the need for high-quality journalism remains a rallying cry for journalists the world over, the definition of what good journalism actually is remains deeply contested. Journalism awards, though, are one arena for the assessment of journalistic achievement and acknowledgment of extraordinary accomplishment. And no awards are better known than the Pulitzer Prizes, especially the Pulitzer Gold Medal for Public Service.

In *Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism*, Roy J. Harris Jr. traces the ninety-year history of that most prestigious award, given annually to a newspaper "for a distinguished example of meritorious public service." Harris's book is the result of five years of interviews with journalists and editors and a thorough examination of the Pulitzer board archives. Harris tells the stories behind the prize, which is given not to individual reporters but to newspapers, from the 1918 award given to the *New York Times* for its reporting on World War I to the award given to the *Wall Street Journal* for its coverage of corporate backdating of stock options for business executives in 2007.

This fascinating book is more than a chronicle of awards, though. It is an overview of the complex relationship between the press and society. It testifies to how the basic principles of good public service journal-

ism have been both challenged and kept alive across the century, certifying that public service, taken from Joseph Pulitzer's own approach to journalism, is very strong in all good journalism. Readers learn that good journalism involves great reporting of hard-to-get information, helping to protect "common men" from scams, and shocking front-page news that stirs terrific controversy. Harris notes that local and regional stories, rather than national or global, are favored for gold medals.

Harris's book traces the history of the American press, but the stories about journalism, the press, and society give rise to questions that have universal value. One of the best-described episodes is the *New York Times's* interview with Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1908. Years before racism became the dominant ideology in Hitler's Germany, the German leader told the *Times* that "blond Christians were born to rule the world" (p. 112). The *Times* editors thought the interview was "world-shaking" and decided to show it to President Roosevelt "for the sake of the national interest" (p. 112). What an interesting argument, but Harris does not pause here. He knows that a good story must keep its flow. So, the tale goes on: Roosevelt agreed that it was astonishing material and advised the *Times* not to publish the interview. One might imagine pages of description and analysis of the president's "suggestion" to the press. Harris records this episode and offers only two sentences of explanation: "Roosevelt had no power to block the *Times*. But Ochs [the publisher], agreeing that this particular news was *not* fit to print, locked it in his private safe" (p. 112).

Pulitzer's Gold is easy to read and well designed. Along with the stories behind the stories, it includes photographs, copies of newspaper pages, and a comprehensive list of all the Pulitzer Prizes, not only the Gold Medal. It begins with the *Times-Picayune's* coverage of Hurricane Katrina, then moves back and forth in time to provide an account of some of the most memorable newspaper achievements in the last ninety years: the *Boston Post's* 1921 award for exposing the Ponzi pyramid investment scam; the *New York World's* early exposure of the Ku Klux Klan; various examples of disclosing cover-ups, exposing local corruption, revealing scandals, and spotlighting hidden wrong-doings. Readers will recall many of these stories: the *Washington Post's* Watergate saga, the *New York Times's* publication of the Pentagon Papers, the *Boston Globe's* reporting on the Catholic Church's pedophilia scandal, the *New York Times's* coverage of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and other coverage that goes back to the Great Depression, both World Wars, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War.

Well researched and informative, this detailed historical account of newspaper excellence will be of interest to teachers and students of journalism in the United States and throughout the world, offering them a collection of case studies that can easily be used in the classroom. The tools that award-winning journalists use in their work, the norms they apply, and the principles that guide their work reflect journalism's attempts to serve the public interest. Talking about the work of the best of journalism helps students better understand how the news makes sense.

Looking at journalism history reveals the mechanisms by which journalism interacts with the society. Bringing examples of best journalism practice shifts the gaze and encourages investigation into the mechanisms by which journalism critically engages with the existing order—yes, to reinforce it, as it happened with the

Pulitzer's Gold in 1919, but far more often to challenge it.

Harris draws on his extensive experience as a journalist and a son of a journalist (his father won one Pulitzer and contributed to three others). He skillfully illustrates team strategies and newsroom organization, showing how award-winning coverage has been planned, researched, organized, and written across time. He also argues that newspapers are public servants and that their future rests, ultimately, in their public service objectives. He demonstrates how that work has been done through history by having a common good in mind, by fostering team work and collaboration, and by having curious, dedicated, persistent, and brave news people to create journalism that matters.

However, the link between high-quality journalism and journalism awards is not straightforward. As many controversies around the awards certify, other factors might have a role in selecting work that will count as the best. Harris notes that power struggles have played a role around some the Pulitzers, and we read that some winners got early notice about the jury voting. But we don't learn much more. Clashes between the juries and the Pulitzer board are mentioned in the book. Harris writes, "Over the years there has been friction between jurors and the Pulitzer board members, who have the power to move entries between categories and to overrule jury recommendations—and frequently do" (p. 12), but we don't learn more. For the author of *Pulitzer's Gold*, a story about journalism that wins medals is a story about journalism, not the politics of journalism awards.

The book's main quality is its textbook potential. *Pulitzer's Gold* is excellent material for teaching reflective journalists, but it is also a good history read, attractive to anyone interested in journalism, newspapers, and the press's importance in the workings of democracy.

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