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Roger Parry. *The Ascent of Media: From Gilgamesh to Google via Gutenberg*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011. ix + 406 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85788-570-5.

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Commissioned by Heidi Tworek

British multi-media entrepreneur Roger Parry has written a highly personal historical interpretation that encompasses his diverse interests; professional experience; and optimistic attitude about the past, present, and future of media, broadly defined. Described in a 2006 *Guardian* newspaper article as a "serial media executive," Parry is a former television and radio reporter for BBC, ITV, and LBC, and more recently was chief executive officer of Clear Channel International (a radio broadcasting, live entertainment, and outdoor advertising conglomerate), overlapping with his chairmanship of magazine publisher Future and a UK regional newspaper group, Johnston Press, among other enterprises.[1] He has worked in advertising and media buying agencies and has also chaired the board of trustees of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

Parry begins the book with an explanation of what he calls "media's building blocks" of mediated content: speech, music, images, and writing. Part 2 covers political, economic, and technological forces that, he states, shaped media and includes a timeline for each force. Beyond the usual news media, such as books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema, and the Web, he discusses theater, pictures, posters, postal systems, comics, telegraph, telephone, recorded sound, and video games in sixteen chapters that comprise part 2–the heart of his three-part book. He uses hundreds of examples of people, organizations, and events to describe each of the sixteen media, and these are often in the form of boxed sidebars, the main graphic element in an otherwise sparsely illustrated book. Parry concludes that the media are an unstoppable juggernaut, citing German journalist Wolfgang Riepl's early twentieth-century theory that older media do not disappear but rather adapt when new media appear. In part 3, he discusses three factors that are affecting the future of the media: screen-based devices, user control, and unlimited capacity.

For journalism historians expecting fresh insights, the evidence that he provides for his conclusions may prove a disappointment. While the book includes well-known personalities and occurrences, it often hones in on tangential information that does not advance Parry's argument about media's constant growth or enhance general knowledge but serves to distract with gossipy tidbits, such as a description in the chapter on magazines. A sidebar on *Vogue* notes "the exotic name of Conde Montrose Nast" and Parry's description of its first editor as "the highly eccentric Edna Woolman Chase" with her strict office dress code and admonishment to an employee who attempted suicide: "We at *Vogue* do not throw ourselves under subway trains. If we must, we take sleeping pills" (p. 172). In the chapter on newspapers, he psychoanalyzes *New York Herald* publisher James Gordon Bennett Jr.: "His personal style was eccentric bordering on manic: He once arrived at a society party so drunk that he urinated in the fireplace in front of all the guests. Coverage of his exploits by other newspapers led to the common expression 'Gordon Bennett!' as an exclamation of surprise or disbelief" (p. 150). Given all the source material available about key media personalities, the author's sometimes quirky choice of anecdotes might make some historians exclaim "Roger Parry!"

Parry argues that a book is a medium of choice for origination of ideas by individual creative writers and indeed he embraces it as *his* medium of choice. He is clearly fascinated with word origins and offers etymological descriptions of various media (including the term "media") throughout the book. He also favors analogies reflected in his writing that likens the scroll to "perhaps the eight-track stereo of its day" after the introduction of the codex format, "unstamped" newspapers (illegally and radically evading stamp taxes) to pirate radio, or postcards to Twitter (pp. 64, 148).

He makes little pretense about original scholarship and indeed his annotated source list reflects a selective synthesis of books and Web sites that he found "most

useful and enjoyable" (p. 388). He admits, albeit in the acknowledgments at the back of the book, that "it is not intended to be an academic textbook" (p. 388). Citing his reading of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (2003) as the catalyst for his own exploration of media history, he states the purpose of *The Ascent of Media*: "It has set out to explain how the main media types have become they [sic] way they are and to illustrate the story with anecdotes and case studies" (p. 381).

While Parry's use of the word "ascent" in the book title suggests some linear trajectory–an upward slope–his frequent analogies suggest a cyclical view, such as his comparisons between unpaid contributions on today's Web and in the 1700s. As for the subtitle, it is alliterative but there is only a passing reference to the actual Epic of Gilgamesh within his book. Other media history books, most notably, Asa Briggs and Peter Burke's *Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (2005), which Parry cites, as well as Bill Kovarik's *Revolutions in Communications: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age* (2011), which he does not reference, have similar subtitles. Neither of those titles more than hint at printing innovations before European adaptation and elaboration of earlier Asian, Middle East, and African methods. Jane Chapman's *Comparative Media History: An Introduction, 1789 to the Present* (2005) that contrasts different periods and industries across five nations is more globally inclusive than Parry's predominantly British and American media comparisons. Both Marshall T. Poe's *A History of Communications: Media and Society from the Evolution of Speech to the Internet* (2010) and *The Long History of New Media: Technology, Historiography & Contextualizing Newness* (2011), an anthology edited by David W. Park, Nicholas W. Jankowski, and Steve Jones, provide more nuanced approaches to technological advances than Parry conveys, but Poe specifically aims his book at students and scholars as does Terence Moran in *Introduction to the History of Communication: Evolutions & Revolutions* (2010).

While not meant for classroom use, *The Ascent of Media* is an encyclopedic attempt to convey the changes within media over time and offers assurance, from a business executive's perspective, that all media will survive despite seismic media shifts occurring even as he writes.

Note

[1]. Jane Martinson, "Roger Parry: Profile: The Serial Media Executive," *Guardian*, September 8, 2006, http://business.guardian.co.uk/story/0,,1867277.00.html.

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