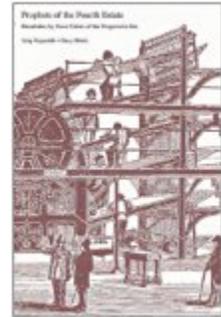


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Amy Reynolds, Gary Hicks. *Prophets of the Fourth Estate: Broad­sides by Press Critics of the Progressive Era*. Los Angeles: Litwin Books, 2012. 208 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9802004-6-1.

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Muckraking the Press

Comcast, Disney, NewsCorp, TimeWarner—in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the corporate parentage and commercialization of American news organizations are widely recognized and well entrenched. Even PBS has gotten into the ratings game by subscribing to Nielsen. For critics, the commercial orientation of the news media inevitably conflicts with ideas about the role of a free and independent press in a democratic society. As media ownership is concentrated in fewer hands and becomes organized on a for-profit basis, it seems less likely that journalism can provide a venue for public deliberation or present an effective check on these powerful interests.

In their recent book *Prophets of the Fourth Estate*, communication scholars Amy Reynolds and Gary Hicks show us that this kind of critical perspective on the press is part of a tradition in American journalism that predates the rise of corporate media in the late twentieth century. Turning to the activist journalism of the Progressive Era, Reynolds and Hicks republish some of the earliest expressions of press criticism—a strand of muckraking that denounced the corrupting influence of commercial interests on American newspapers and periodicals. Featuring the work of Oswald Garrison Villard, Charles Edward Russell, and Moorfield Storey, among others, the reprinted articles presented in *Prophets of the Fourth Estate*, together with Reynolds and Hicks’s contextualizing essays, are a worthwhile addition to the existing literature on the critical journalism of the early twentieth cen-

tury.

Set within the milieu of advocacy and activist journalism, this emerging genre of criticism aimed at revealing how many of the same interests monopolizing other areas of American life had seized the instruments of the free press for self-serving ends to the detriment of public deliberation. The press prophets featured in this volume all shared the assumption that modern mass media exerted a tremendous influence on public opinion, but lamented the evident failure of the fourth estate to live up to its obligations to the public interest—a failure that these authors largely attributed to commercial domination brought on by financial necessity. Preparing detailed exposés of corporate ownership, of advertisers’ clout with editorial staffs, and various efforts at news management, these early press critics “aimed to enhance the role of the press in a democracy, limit corporatization, and better utilize the press’ capacity as an agent of social change” (p. 7). Passionately argued and specific in their indictments, the articles republished in *Prophets of the Fourth Estate* cover a range of issues in which the tensions between commercialization and the democratic role of the free press manifested themselves. The result is a volume that may well supplement Ellen F. Fitzpatrick’s classic *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles* (1994) in journalism history courses.

Following a brief introduction to the social activist and political reform movements of the Progressive Era,

Reynolds and Hicks begin their overview of press criticism by devoting two chapters to the work of muckraking journalist, newspaper editor, and one-time Socialist Party candidate for governor of New York, Charles Edward Russell. Like the other press critics featured later in the volume, Russell acknowledged that the high cost of producing and disseminating periodical literature (together with low cover and subscription prices) necessitated the revenue provided by advertisers. These business interests consequently wielded a tremendous amount of leverage over news content, and often prevented the publication of undesirable stories. Disturbed by this encroaching influence on editorial staffs, Russell lashed out at these interlopers in a series of articles appearing in *Pearson's* magazine that revealed the troubling effects of the necessary relationship between publishers and advertisers. In the first installment of this series, "The Keeping of the Kept Press" republished in *Prophets of the Fourth Estate*, Russell attacked what he called the "Central Financial Interests"—the department stores, railroads, and other advertisers—that could effectively have suppressed certain stories by withholding or threatening to withhold advertising revenue. In turn, Russell noted, journalists and editors toed the line, framing coverage of Wall Street and other business interests in a favorable way, and by derisively dismissing advocates for social reform. By financial necessity, the nation's news media had become the tamed creature of privileged interests.

Discussion of the influence of business interests on reporting and publishing continues in chapter 5, in which Reynolds and Hicks focus on the impact of advertising and consumer culture. The chapter features two articles concerned with the broader political consequences of advertising, commercialization, and consolidation of newspaper ownership. In "The Packers and the Press," Robert L. Duffus examined an ongoing labor dispute in the Chicago meatpacking industry, noting how the meat-packer's use of paid advertisements as a form of publicity greatly skewed news coverage in the factory owners' favor. The second article, a May 1918 editorial that appeared in the journal *The Public* titled "Monopolizing the Press," bemoaned the recent consolidations of newspaper ownership and indispensability of advertising revenue. The editorial also opposed new postal regulations proposing to increase the cost of carriage for periodicals—a move that would have further subordinated the fourth estate to advertisers. Though their perspectives are quite distinct—news coverage of labor issues on the one hand, and consolidation and government policy on the other—both Duffus and *The Public* pointed to the troubling po-

litical implications of newspapers' dependency on advertising revenue. For Duffus, rather than a simple list of wares, the advertisement had become a "delicate psychological weapon" wielded by special interests as a means of creating favorable publicity (p. 104). For the editors of *The Public*, the very cost of publication and dissemination of periodicals put commercial enterprises at a distinct advantage over smaller, and perhaps more "daring," journals.

Early press critics took note not only of the ways in which advertisers affected the coverage of certain news topics, but also how publishers' drive for circulation and profit resulted in an overemphasis on prurient and titillating content at the expense of civil discourse. In chapter 6, Reynolds and Hicks focus on the work of journalist and first National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) president Moorfield Storey, who sharply criticized what he viewed as America's imperialist foreign policy beginning with the Spanish-American War. His 1922 article "The Daily Press" should resonate with students of twenty-first-century media concerned with the tensions between the commercial and critical obligations of the fourth estate. In this piece, Storey placed much of the blame for the violence and racism that dominated the early twentieth century on the rather milquetoast and complacent output of the contemporary press, an institution that in his estimation had wholly abdicated its responsibilities for public edification and synthesis in favor of gossip, sports, and crime. Laying out an alternative vision, Storey argued that it was incumbent upon the press as a shaper of public opinion to engage their readership on political and social issues, and to resist sensationalism.

Questions of solvency and the commodification of newspapers were not the only threats to the fourth estate perceived by these early press critics. The two articles reprinted in chapter 9 deal with an insidious external threat—that of the press agent and the emerging field of public relations. In their introduction to this final chapter, Reynolds and Hicks rehearse the early history of public relations and public opinion during and after the Great War (i.e., Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information and Harold Lasswell's analysis of propaganda), noting the pioneering publicity work of Ivy Lee, and framing early public relations as a method of news management employed by some of the nation's largest companies and wealthiest men. In "The Failure of the Fourth Estate" for instance, Donald Wilhelm lamented that the cherished notion of press freedom enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution did not pro-

protect the press from publicity agents employed by companies and government institutions, and who were increasingly the only source of (carefully managed) information made available to journalists. In a similar critique of information bottlenecks, Roscoe C. E. Brown wrote in his article “The Menace to Journalism,” that press agents “stand guard at many sources of news, fending off the too keen inquirer and leaving the newspaper the choice of letting itself be spoon-fed or going empty” (p. 183). For Brown, public relations is tantamount to free advertising for which the only remedy is total embargo. To do otherwise, he argued, would be to cede autonomy, and default on the special distinction assumed by the fourth estate. Brown’s contention echoes ominously into the twenty-first century.

After Brown’s article however, *Prophets of the Fourth Estate* ends quite abruptly, and without a conclusion.

This seems like a missed opportunity that may have allowed the authors some final words of summation about the sources they have reproduced, and further development of some of the themes they have identified over the course of the preceding nine chapters. Here too, other omissions leave the reader wanting a bit more. For example, while the authors provide helpful biographical sketches on Russell, Storey, and Villard, other featured authors like Duffus, Brown, and Willhelm merit no such introduction.

Despite these moments, Reynolds and Hicks’s *Prophets of the Fourth Estate* offers researchers and students of Progressive-Era journalism an alternative perspective on muckraking tradition. Into this slim volume, Reynolds and Hicks have gathered a fine collection of primary documents that illuminates the early history of American press criticism.

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