

H-Net Reviews

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Giovanna Dell'Orto. *AP Foreign Correspondents in Action: World War II to the Present.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 393 pp. \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-51930-5; \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-10830-1.

Reviewed by Benjamin Cawthra (California State University, Fullerton)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

An interview with a killer of thousands in Cambodia. The aftermath of a nuclear reactor meltdown in Japan. The nagging sense that any story from France should mention the Eiffel Tower or wine. From the grave to the gratuitous, Associated Press (AP) foreign correspondents have told the story of the world beyond US borders. Giovanna Dell'Orto's study of reporting practices abroad underscores the significance of the AP, which has evolved from its origins in 1846 to today's journalistic giant providing news to roughly half the world's population via two thousand stories per day. Historians will find much to ponder in Dell'Orto's work.

Dell'Orto argues that while the technical processes used in international news gathering may change drastically over time, journalistic goals and standards are common across eras and continents. She has a significant continuity supporting her argument: the longevity and ubiquity of the AP, a news service with a lower profile than stand-alone newspapers and magazines but with a broader reach and deeper commitment to global coverage. For evidence, she relies on extensive oral history interviews with AP journalists. That a reporter covering the Allied invasion of Italy during World War II and another living and working in post-9/11 Pakistan have professional practices in common is more significant, in Dell'Orto's view, than the transition from midcentury wire service transmission to digital filing in the Internet era or even the differing geographical and political contexts. Such a history of media communication would be a far different book and one less informed by the particular experiences, professional aspirations, and, especially, moral commitments inscribed in the journalists' telling

of their own stories.

And what stories they are. Acknowledging Dell'Orto as one of their own, the journalists answer the questions rather than ask them, and we discover that codes of ethics, personal safety, the protection of sources, and the long days and nights wondering whether anyone else in the world will care about a story from a troubled and far-away place are common concerns. The stories of Kathy Gannon, wounded and her photographer colleague murdered by police in Afghanistan, or Tony Smith's efforts to bring wounded and dead colleagues out of Sarajevo (Smith and other journalists had gone into the city when UN observers pulled out) are dramatic stories of journalists in danger, but at the heart of the book are observations on reporting practices common over time. The narrators rely on knowledge of professional methods combined with memory of the past. While Dell'Orto acknowledges the usual caveats about the subjectivity of memory, she also notes that most of the memories are related to written (and published) work, so that the narrators' recall seems especially sharp.

Dell'Orto covers the preparation (often shockingly little) of correspondents for foreign postings; the ways in which stories turn into news; the methods for locating and cultivating sources (and keeping them alive); the mixed blessings of working for a US news organization abroad; and the ratio of risk to reward in covering danger zones and encountering foreign officials. Reporters also discuss the ethics of teamwork and competition both within the AP and in relation to other news gatherers, and the ways correspondents work with the bureau and

home editorial desks, sometimes filing stories in almost impossible circumstances and sometimes working hard at great risk for stories that do not become a priority. Historians should find Dell’Orto’s chapter on audience intriguing. The journalists seem quite conscious of their audiences—sometimes to their frustration—to a degree greater than most writers. The audience is the lifeblood of the profession. The stories that go untold reflect the fickleness of an audience or perhaps the reporter’s or editor’s inability to frame the story in ways that will attract and retain a readership with seemingly no direct stake in it.

Dell’Orto’s effort to cover these broad themes through use of a boisterous choir of speakers from multiple generations is the book’s obvious strength. The approach comes at the cost of readability, however. On one page, the reader may be asked to hopscotch several countries and pick up stories from different decades. Dell’Orto’s themes may make the specific time and place less relevant, but I suspect some readers will be frustrated by not being able to settle in place long enough to grasp and retain the context before moving forward. Revisiting the same locale several times over the course of the book only reinforces the sense of fragmentation.

The book is a useful reminder to historians of just what it takes to get history’s first draft: journalists who believe so strongly in the worth of their labor that they

risk their own lives and—occasionally and with regret—those of their sources to get the story that decades later historians may ponder in relative safety. It also functions as a rejoinder to those who would whip up popular enmity against journalists for political gain. One cannot read Terry Anderson describing his seven years of captivity in Iran without admiration for his courage, or Eduardo Gallardo’s encounters in the Peru AP office with, first, Peruvian guerrillas and then with the secret police—in both instances at gunpoint—without acknowledging the deep commitments correspondents make as a hallmark of their profession. Gallardo’s trouble began at the end of his first ten minutes in the office substituting for a vacationing bureau chief. Gallardo tells Dell’Orto that “of course, I’d be happy to go back and do it” (p. 198).

As Dell’Orto’s work shows, despite cultural bias and blinders, despite the regular tailoring of story selection to appeal to Western audiences, and despite the shrinking resources allotted foreign coverage by news organizations over time, being a professional with moral commitment still matters. Historians reading Dell’Orto’s account may question her thematic organization or the kernel of liberal humanism that seems to undergird the project, but they will not be able to question the commitment of Dell’Orto’s dozens of narrators to finding and exposing the truth, wherever it may be found and whatever the risk.

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