



Jonas Brendebach, Martin Herzer, Heidi Tworek, eds. *International Organizations and the Media in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Exorbitant Expectations*. Routledge Studies in Modern History. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. 256 pp. \$140.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-138-30308-9.

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Jonas Brendebach, Martin Herzer, and Heidi Tworek have produced a wide-ranging, thematically coherent, and ultimately pathbreaking edited volume showing the ways that international organizations have used media to communicate their activities, demonstrate their functions, and legitimate their presences. Many international organizations that have been involved in promoting internationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were united in a belief in “the importance of the media and publicity for achieving the political aims of international organizations” (p. 1).

There are two major interrelated narratives that run throughout the nine essays in the collection: one about the trajectory of international relations as told through a diverse group of organizations and another about the history of public relations as told through the creation and reception of information about these organizations. This volume covers a wide period of time, starting with a study of the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (CCNR), an organization established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and continuing through to the activities of the United Nations in the 1980s. In between, the editors and authors present a series of cases from around the world, some of which are nonprofit entities like

UNESCO, while others are for-profit mass media organizations, as Glenda Sluga’s excellent chapter on Hollywood films shows.

One of the core strengths of this volume is the reach and breadth of its case studies, which range across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and push widely beyond the Western world. The book is sensitive to changes in media while avoiding the trap of overstating technological novelty. The case studies show how international organizations reached the public through a variety of media, including print, film, radio, television, monuments, and buildings. In some cases, international organizations used events like mega-concerts aiming to induce coverage in the media.

The book’s case studies proceed in a chronological fashion, starting with Robert Mark Spaulding’s chapter on the CCNR, the “world’s first inter-governmental organization” set up specifically to develop rules governing trade along the Rhine, a river that cut through seven separate states (p. 17). While the CCNR played a significant regulatory role after its formation, as has often been the case with reporting about such organizations, spectacular events overshadowed the regular business of international relations. The CCNR’s founding and early activities received scant coverage relative to the organization’s importance. One of the most

important reasons for the lack of coverage was “Napoleon’s dramatic escape from Elba,” which “completely eclipsed the work of the congress” in its early days (p. 21). In other words, the CCNR, the world’s first intergovernmental organization, faced the problem that has plagued most such organizations since: many people are not that interested in learning about these organizations’ regular activities, and thus commercial media have had little incentive to provide reporting about them. “Without the drama of high politics, there was little deemed newsworthy in the regular business of the commission” (p. 28). Spaulding’s essay does well to introduce one of the themes running throughout the book in drawing attention to the fact that international organizations do not often provoke active coverage by an evolving media system catering to audiences that tend to want more exciting news.

Richard R. John’s insightful essay on the Universal Postal Union (UPU) expands on this idea that important and successful international organizations often operate as if hidden in plain sight. Like the CCNR, the UPU played an important role in the lives of many people, despite the fact that few regularly recognized it. “Prior to the commercialization of the Internet in the 1990s,” John notes, “the mail was, for the vast majority of the world’s peoples, the primary means of international communications” (p. 40). To send a piece of mail from one country to another, people relied on the UPU’s policies and networks in which they had simultaneously complete confidence and almost total ignorance. “In the case of international postal communications,” John argues of the UPU’s undergirding of global information circulation by ordinary people, “a revolution succeeded and almost no one noticed” (p. 40). John’s essay draws creatively on the evolving iconography of the UPU as reflected in its stamps and, in one outstanding example, the study of the commission of the French sculptor René de Saint-Marceaux to build a monument that was unveiled in Bern in 1909. What the UPU succeeded in doing through its regular activities, John

shows, is to “convince the public that, unlike generals and diplomats, they were dispassionate experts who lacked a political agenda. Had contemporaries come to regard their deliberations as partisan, rather than as neutral and objective, they risked embroilment in Great Power politics” (p. 38). The success of the UPU, in other words, rested on its ability to transmit media in the form of letters and information while at the same time staying out of geopolitical fray.

While the first two essays in this collection are about organizations that are less well known to historians, subsequent essays focus on groups that were prominent and widely recognized by contemporaries. In two cases, Tomoko Akami and David Allen analyze how the League of Nations was hampered in its publicity efforts by the fact that those who designed the strategies were elites and experts who had little sense of what a mass public actually wanted. For Akami, the Tokyo office of the Information Section of the League of Nations represented an ambitious but unsuccessful attempt to influence public opinion. One of the primary reasons for this, as Akami argues, was that the organization “targeted opinion leaders and policy makers, and its materials were created by and for experts who could advise policy makers or inform delegates on [the] League’s discussions” (p. 76). These elites and experts, in many cases, had views and interests that were not shared by ordinary people, an argument that Allen expands on in his chapter on the efforts by the League of Nations to erect a pavilion at the New York World’s Fair in 1939-40. In this case, the league used the built environment as a form of media, a widespread and important part of pre-World War II political culture. “Architecture can communicate national and international power,” Allen points out, “something clear in the building programs of New Deal America, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and even the League, with its elaborate Geneva campus” (p. 111). In the case of the World’s Fair pavilion, however, a well-intentioned promotional effort missed its target audience by being inatten-

tive to how fairgoers might approach the building. “Conceived by a tiny network of internationalists lacking exhibition experience,” Allen argues, “unpracticed in modern techniques of public relations and mass spectacle, the Pavilion was poorly attended” (p. 94). In the two cases on the League of Nations, publicity efforts were hampered by the fact that many within the league lacked a good grasp on the techniques of public relations and gave insufficient consideration to the diverse desires of its audience.

As the League of Nations chapters focus on some of the challenges of producing meaningful public information, Arthur Asseraf’s chapter demonstrates one of the significant strengths of the collection, in that the cases have a wide geographic range and incorporate excellent analysis about countries that are not often discussed in the same volume. Asseraf’s chapter, for example, focuses on media reception by the Algerian public and on the circulation of knowledge among people who were excluded from official channels of communication. It does so through analyses of a variety of information circulated by Algerians, including petitions, rumors (as reported by French authorities), and newspapers. Asseraf’s contribution also adds a crucial dimension of reception study to the book, and it shows the ways that information about international organizations circulated among and was interpreted by ordinary people. “Taken together, petitions, rumors, newspapers and alternative congresses offer a paradox—that information about the League of Nations was available in interwar Algeria but that did not automatically lead to embracing the League’s internationalism. It is important not to confuse the availability of information about international organizations with an adherence to a desire for self-determination along these norms” (p. 133).

Besides a widening of geographic scope, one of the key historical shifts that the book charts in the post-World War II period is in the ways that international organizations sought the inclusion of

more diverse global voices. This involved the formation of new groups and the evolution of concerns among those groups. As Brendebach shows, “Under UNESCO’s guidance, scholars and civil servants believed, the growing number of developing countries from the Global South could initiate state action and national legislation to create a national mass media sector which was considered vital to their overall development” (p. 158). UNESCO tried, though not always successfully, to be more sensitive to the needs of diverse countries around the world. “If communications had been a tool to perpetuate dependency and hinder national and cultural sovereignty, then a more active, reciprocal notion of media exchange could help to redress those international conditions perpetuating political, technological, economic, and cultural imbalances between North and South” (p. 175).

In some respects, international organizations were at their most effective in the postwar period when staffers continued these attempts to reach non-elite audiences. As Monika Baár’s brilliant chapter shows, the United Nations in the 1960s and 1970s employed a variety of creative strategies to promote its interests and programs. For example, Baár examines the creation of public relations campaigns like the United Nations Year of Women in 1975, musical concerts featuring hugely popular acts, posters with leading contemporary visual artists, and photojournalism. Taken together, these tactics created a “new hybrid of politics and pop culture” aimed at a wide and diverse global audience (p. 192). “Whereas official documents were read primarily by experts,” Baár shows, “the posters, photographs, and concerts appealed to the ‘general public.’ The vivid posters and photos literally added color to the somewhat bland and bureaucratic image of the UN, while the mega-concert increased the volume with which its achievements were communicated to the world. Moreover, photos and posters were easier to circulate in regions where radio and TV transmission was not (necessarily) an option” (p. 198).

Having started with the CCNR and a consideration of a river, the book has an environmental bookend in Simone Müller's analysis of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Created at a late twentieth-century moment when global concerns about the environment were increasing, and at a time when the environmental beat became a more prominent and regular part of the news cycle, UNEP "directed its policies primarily towards the Global South," and it was successful in creating an annual publicity event known as World Environment Day (pp. 204-205). As in Baár's study, Müller shows how these kinds of events connected with a broader public. "Starting in 1973," Müller argues, "UNEP's member-states celebrated the day with myriad events ranging from addresses by heads of state, distinguished scientists, and political leaders to broadcasters of special radio and television programs alongside activities in its educational institutions" (p. 214). At the same time, UNEP's ongoing efforts to create public information by and from experts continued a long-standing problem of communication by international organizations, in that the mass public often did not want to consume what these elite organizations produced. As Müller points out, "While the mass media were a tool to instigate short-term attention through providing apocalyptic-sounding news about environmental catastrophes, UNEP considered information to be their tool to instigate long-term changes in the human mind and humanity's understanding of the environment. Information, not news, was the pathway to environmental wisdom" (p. 206). The overall problem remained that the demand for this elite-generated information never matched the enthusiasm of the suppliers, and commercial media organizations found little reason to devote energy to helping in its circulation. Ultimately, UNEP was, like many previous international organizations, "unfit for print" (p. 206).

This persistent disconnect between organizations and audiences is one of the most important takeaways from the collected essays in this vol-

ume. There is a theme of well-intentioned but ultimately rather tragic optimism that elites have about the mass public and this is reflected in the "exorbitant expectations" phrase in the book's subtitle. While many working within international organizations continued to hope and believe that the mass public would avail itself of the good information that they were providing about what these organizations were doing and promoting, the fact was that many people neither wanted that information nor thought deeply about it when it was put in front of them. As Brendebach, Herzer, and Tworek conclude, their book "questions some of the basic assumptions about how international organizations could use media to promote or enable international governance. More information did not necessarily strengthen public or political support for international initiatives" (p. 2).

Overall, this volume does an exceptional job of showing the successes and failures that international organizations had in using media to reach the public over the long term of the last two centuries. It offers scholars an excellent model for how to do global history in covering such a wide swath of time and array of countries, and it should prove foundational and influential on a range of new studies about other international organizations.

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