

Michael Stamm. *Dead Tree Media: Manufacturing the Newspaper in Twentieth-Century North America.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. 376 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-2605-1.

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Robert McCormick is best remembered as a prominent newspaper publisher who used the *Chicago Tribune* as a platform to amplify his conservative views. Until now, little had been written about McCormick's extraordinary business acumen and the industrial complex that helped make his paper the powerhouse that it was for much of the twentieth century. In *Dead Tree Media: Manufacturing the Newspaper in Twentieth-Century North America*, Michael Stamm traces the evolution of the *Chicago Tribune* as a corporate behemoth that owned vast Canadian forests, built and operated newsprint mills, maintained a fleet of ships, dammed rivers and built hydroelectric plants, created a company town, and constructed and managed a modern printing plant in downtown Chicago. McCormick's sprawling supply network fed the presses at the *Tribune* and its highly successful tabloid cousin, the *New York Daily News*, which at one time were the two highest-circulating dailies in the country. As Stamm points out, McCormick, a fierce critic of government overreach and an anti-British isolationist, nonetheless built this far-flung multinational corporation by deftly navigating trade and tariff policy and by working closely with provincial governments in Quebec and Ontario.

Stamm explores "the ways in which foreign trade, natural resource exploitation, and industri-

al capitalism were central to the production of the mass-circulation printed newspaper in the twentieth century" (p. 3). In doing so, he departs from other newspaper historians in looking not at the practice of journalism in the creation of editorial content but at the business of printing a daily newspaper as an ongoing industrial enterprise that voraciously consumed inputs to produce an inexpensive and highly perishable consumer good. Much of that newsprint consumption was driven not by more and more diverse editorial content to appeal to a mass audience, but by the need to provide space for increasing amounts of advertising to generate the revenue that subsidized the production of bigger papers. "The history of the mass-circulation daily newspaper is both a history of journalism and a history of advertising," Stamm notes. "Through the display ads offering an abundance of branded consumer products and through classified ads offering a variety of local goods and services, newspapers became catalogs of daily life and guides to the twentieth century's emerging consumer culture" (p. 5).

Stamm begins with an overview of the history of print production and the technology that made it possible by the mid-nineteenth century to produce a mass-circulation urban newspaper. Before then, printers faced a laborious process that had not changed much since the days of Johannes

Gutenberg. In the early nineteenth century, advances in papermaking and the development of the rotary press greatly increased the capacity of publishers to print a daily paper, allowing for the birth of the penny-press era of cheap papers aimed at a mass audience. As urban populations grew, publishers consumed increasing amounts of newsprint, which at the time was produced using rags. In the late 1800s, technological developments allowed for the mass production of newsprint from wood pulp. However, only the spruce trees of northern forests were suitable for newsprint production, and mills began a rapid deforestation of the Northeast and Upper Midwest.

McCormick, whose lineage in the Chicago newspaper business can be traced to his grandfather Joseph Medill, became publisher in 1911. Like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, McCormick had been involved in politics and his future might have been different had he been more successful. As publisher, he sought to exert political influence, and he recognized that a steady supply of newsprint at stable prices was necessary for his paper to thrive. Indeed, Stamm notes that McCormick was as much an industrialist as he was a newspaper publisher. "From practically the moment that he took over as *Tribune* publisher in 1911 until his death in 1955, Robert McCormick sought to expand the commercial success and political influence of his publishing company, and his primary strategy to achieve those goals was the vertical integration of his industrial operations" (p. 109).

As sources of pulpwood were being exhausted in the United States, newsprint manufacturers began to look to Canada for its uncut forests, and imports for domestic production increased steadily in the early 1900s. Canadian pulpwood was subject to export restrictions and, until 1911, import tariffs. In that year, a trade agreement lifted the US tariff on newsprint manufactured with pulp from private lands in Canada. In 1913, the tariff was lifted for all newsprint, including that

produced using the much larger publicly owned provincial forests. US manufacturers rapidly shifted production to Canada. Newspaper operators were instrumental in getting these favorable trade agreements. "The creation of this cross-border newsprint industry was the hard-won result of lobbying by the US newspaper business," Stamm argues. "Many publishers were willing to use their newspapers' content and personal influence with policymakers in the service of their commercial aims, and in doing so they threw themselves into the center of ongoing debates about two of the most important issues of the day: trade and conservation" (p. 79). Also, this shift in production made newsprint manufacturers and their US customers more dependent on foreign pulpwood. The market was characterized by price spikes, newsprint shortages, and domestic and international supply competition, especially from British press barons.

While most newspaper publishers negotiated newsprint supply and price agreements, with volume buyers such as Hearst getting favorable terms, McCormick decided almost immediately after assuming control of the *Tribune* that he needed to build his own paper mill in Canada to satisfy demand for a steady supply of newsprint. McCormick began work on developing a mill in Thorold, Ontario, on the Welland Canal, and newsprint production began in early 1913. “When Robert McCormick initiated plans to build his own newsprint mill in Ontario, he was employing a strategy shared by few other publishers willing to tolerate the cost and risk involved” (p. 118). As Stamm notes, McCormick’s initiative was a bold business decision that capitalized on state policy at time when US-Canada trade relations were the subject of intense debate on both sides of the border. Where Richard Norton Smith, in *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880-1955* (1997), offers a few pages devoted to the development of the Canadian venture, the heart of Stamm’s work is a precise and detailed account of the creation and operation of the multinational, industrial giant that McCormick built.

McCormick’s appetite for newsprint to supply the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News* was not satisfied with the Thorold mill. While acquiring rights to huge additional tracts of forest, McCormick began work on what would be his most ambitious project: a newsprint mill, two massive hydroelectric dams, and an entire town on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence River in Quebec. The town, Baie Comeau, was developed beginning in the 1930s to provide housing and basic necessities in the remote region. It was for all practical purposes a company town, laid out by Tribune Company officials who managed the land, controlled building permits, and built medical, recreational, and educational facilities. To get newsprint from the Canadian mills, the Tribune Company owned a fleet of boats designed to carry newsprint and other cargo between the mills and newspaper plants in Chicago and New York. The

company’s research scientists continued to refine the milling process to make better use of the raw materials. By the late 1950s the Tribune Company was the largest producer of artificial vanilla flavoring and a partner in an energy-hungry aluminum smelting operation. Stamm notes the irony that McCormick, who was a critic of the Tennessee Valley Authority and all things related to the government exercise of power under the New Deal, would undertake a TVA-style regional development project. He did so by working with provincial government officials in Canada. Although the *Tribune* was perceived to be anti-labor, McCormick was a benevolent manager who encouraged his Canadian papermill employees to unionize and provided employee amenities in the style of a welfare capitalist.

Stamm concludes with a robust discussion of the decline of the Tribune Company and the printed newspaper in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first. Newspapers experimented with content and delivery innovations to retain the reader and the advertising revenue that came with them. Throughout the twentieth century newspapers battled with other mass media outlets—first, mass-circulation magazines, then radio, as Stamm previously noted in *Sound Business: Newspaper, Radio, and the Politics of New Media* (2016), then local television and the vast expansion of options offered via cable. Newspapers were early adopters of alternative delivery systems, such as facsimile broadcasting and narrow-casting of a daily news report. These experiments were ahead of their time, and broadcast and telecommunications technologies were not sufficiently developed to allow for a practical alternative to the printed broadsheet. The birth and then growth of the internet in the 1990s greatly accelerated the decline already underway in the 1960s as readership per household began to slip with each passing year. Partly in response, newspapers in the 1960s began to reinvent their content to be more reader-friendly, as recently explored by Thomas Schmidt in *Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling*

Movement in American Print Journalism (2019). Matthew Pressman argued in *On Press: The Liberal Values that Shaped the News* (2018) that papers also became more opinionated as they tried to offer interpretation to appeal to the reader who seemed to want something other than the fact-driven twentieth-century style of news reporting.

By the 1980s, most major newspaper companies, such as Knight Ridder, McClatchy, and the Tribune Company, had converted from private ownership to publicly traded corporations that answered to investors, and to some extent, analysts. The personal journalism practiced by McCormick gave way to a corporate journalism that demanded steady and extraordinarily high profits. As Gilbert Cranberg and his co-authors noted in *Taking Stock: Journalism and the Publicly Traded Newspaper Company* (2001), newspapers came to be driven largely by the bottom line, rather than by any journalistic ethic or tradition. Newsprint was among a newspaper's largest production costs. Philip Meyer, in *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (2009), noted that in the late twentieth century fluctuating newsprint costs, especially for big-city dailies, threatened the stability of net revenue and could lead to cuts in newsroom budgets. For practicing journalists who matured in an earlier era, it was a time when the authority of the editor eroded, and the authority of the business manager rose, a development lamented by Davis Merritt in *Knightfall: Knight Ridder and How the Erosion of Newspaper Journalism is Putting Democracy at Risk* (2001).

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand the history of the twentieth-century newspaper. In *Dead Tree Media*, Stamm examines a side of the industry that is often overlooked or shorted in histories of journalism, great newspapers, and individual writers and their words on the printed page. Stamm demonstrates that the printed newspaper was the result of a complex industrial process that created and de-

livered millions of unique products every day. This enterprise, at least until the early twenty-first century, provided not just news but also a platform for the advertising that paid much of the cost of production. Long before reporters, columnists, and editors could send their work to the printing presses to meet another daily deadline, a vast industrial supply chain and network of machinery and skilled operators needed to be in place to ensure that papers would reach readers while the news was still relatively fresh.

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