The American newspaper newsroom is both a locally situated workplace and an enterprise with nationally shared norms. It is the site of the mass production of perishable news items, and the place where socially constructed reality is given form. It exists in the minds and memories of individual journalists, and in the popular images conveyed by films such as Spotlight (2015), All the President’s Men (1976), and dozens of other movies created over the last century. Most newsrooms have a strong regional focus, yet they are defined more by size, scope, and vision than by geography.

Will Mari ambitiously wades into this complex subject in The American Newsroom: A History, 1920-1960. Using memoirs of journalists, trade publications, and journalism textbooks, Mari examines the workings and hierarchy of the mid-century metropolitan newsroom, from the entry-level assistant to the senior editor. As Mari writes in the introduction, the book considers “how reporters formed a unique newsroom culture internally while interacting with one another and with other people outside of their occupational community” (p. 4). Collectively, Mari writes, the newsroom was “an active place of social construction of roles, norms, and practices” (p. 16). Covering a forty-year period in which the industry underwent significant change, Mari also assesses the use and importance of now mundane technology, such as the car, radio, and telephone, and he looks at the disruption of newsroom routines and power relationships brought about by the creation and expansion of the American Newspaper Guild.

Mari explores the dynamics of power in the newsroom and examines how news becomes news. Is it driven from the top down and deemed news because supervising managers have made it so, or is news created by the reporter/gatherer and fed into the maw of the daily press, or is news a self-evident report of something that occurs outside of the newsroom entirely? In fact, of course, it might be any or all the options at once.

Mari drills down to examine the agency that writers and reporters were able to exercise in the
practice of daily newspaper journalism in the mid-century. Contrary to the critics of the press of the time, conservative publishers were not in a position to pull levers to determine the content of every story. True, publishers appointed top editors, and top editors hired managing editors who knew how the publisher wanted the paper to represent the world. Still, when the presses were set to run, stories had to be done and the pages had to be composed. This relentless demand for copy privileged news routines and news gatherers.

As Michael Stamm noted in *Dead Tree Media: Manufacturing the Newspaper in Twentieth Century North America* (2018), the production of a newspaper was an industrial process, in many ways akin to an automobile plant. News was an input to be rapidly consumed in the making of a time-sensitive product. The newspaper’s appetite for news was almost insatiable and it could only be satisfied, no matter the staff size and no matter the daily occurrences, by editors and reporters functioning with agreed-upon definitions of what constitutes news. For sure, senior editors exercised oversight of content, and as Mari points out, the copy desk was a line of defense not only for style, but also for substance.

Even so, reporters were the primary information gatherers. Although a rewrite staff might assemble and polish the reporting, they could only work with the material provided to them or that which they could draw from clips and wire services. Mari finds increasing reporter autonomy throughout the period, especially as interpretive reporting became more common in the 1940s and 1950s. Still, as Warren Breed noted in his classic study of news worker socialization, reporters also practiced self-censorship and discipline to fit in, to get on the front page, and to please the boss and colleagues.[1] As Mari notes, all parts of the newsroom enjoyed a certain “negotiated professional autonomy” that was “complemented, confirmed, and sometimes contested through the active self-policing and reinforcement of values” (p. 5).

Mari places this dynamic process of creating news within the confines of the physical space known as the newsroom. He devotes chapters to copy assistants and photographers, the rewrite and copy desks, junior and senior reporters, and editors. Mari notes that location within any newsroom was itself a visible statement of power as much as it was a function of workflow. Within the walls of a newsroom, the hierarchy was known. Indeed, the timely output of the news operation depended on those power relationships.

In the chapter on copy assistants, typically called copy boys and girls though they would have been mostly young men, Mari notes the importance of this labor to the flow of work. These entry-level workers literally moved copy within a newsroom, ran errands, and performed other tasks. Those jobs served as the introduction to the newsroom and as a proving ground for those who hoped for a position as a reporter. Unlike the boys and girls who roamed the streets and transit stations early in the century hawking papers, copy assistants earned a salary and actually had a chance to move up within the news organization.

Mari notes that the introduction of technology, especially the phone, the car, and the radio, freed reporters from the newsroom and allowed them to spend more time in the field. Mari finds that the demand for multitasking faced by contemporary journalists was also present in the 1920s and beyond, as the technology of photography made it easier for reporters to take their own pictures. Indeed, Mari argues that photographers did not come into their own as respected journalists equal to reporters until after World War II, partly due to their reporting from the battlefield.

In his chapter on the rewrite staff and copy editors, Mari observes that power was in the hands of those who had their hands on the copy. “Power was represented by control over the story-production process, including how news copy came into the newsroom from the field. Once it
was received, edited, and placed on the page, its publication was the end of a long chain of events occurring on a very human context, with many hands touching and shaping it along the way” (p. 53). Copy editors had and exerted authority over the news story. This power differential created tensions between the reporters who gathered the information, and the copy editors who were deputized to pass judgment and alter the story, within the limits of what was possible under deadline. The copy desk also prepared the headlines for the day’s report, and editors decided where stories appeared in the paper (the play), extending influence over the news product but also enlarging the gulf between the copy desk and reporters and columnists. Still, producing the paper every day required teamwork among work groups that developed their own routines and culture.

Mari offers two chapters that look at reporters in the newsroom, handling junior reporters in one chapter and senior reporters and columnists in another, and noting at the outset that there was “an intense degree of stratification and diversity of both agency and ability” (p. 81). As a reporter, your status could be measured by what kind of assignments you got, what play you received, and increasingly, whether your work was identified with a byline. Within the news organizations of the time, many journalists functioned as general assignment reporters or “leg men” who reported on crime and other news from the field and who would be connected to the newsroom via the phone and the rewrite desk. Senior reporters might work as beat writers or specialists who covered more complicated topics, such as government, business, or labor, or they might work as feature writers, columnists, or editorial writers. Some beats and roles were more prestigious than others, but all senior reporters had greater autonomy than did the junior reporter: “They were more empowered and more ‘professionalized’ than their colleagues, and self-aware of this superior status both in and out of the newsroom” (p. 105).

One of the strongest chapters covers the impact of the American Newspaper Guild, which emerged in 1933 as Depression-weary reporters sought to improve pay and working conditions and find job security through collective action. Mari notes that one factor driving the initial burst of Guild organizing was the publishers’ attempt to define reporters as professionals and thus exempt them from wage guidelines being considered by the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Ironically, it was the reporters’ own claim to professional status that proved to be one of the biggest impediments to Guild organizing, especially in the 1930s as Guild leaders embraced the trade union movement. Mari notes that Guild activity boosted pay and improved working conditions, and that it also brought a greater sense of solidarity in the newsroom. Undoubtedly, the Guild improved the life of the journalist, likely even in newspapers without a Guild contract, and even for news workers who as supervisors were not eligible for union membership. Still, the class consciousness described by Dale Benjamin Scott in his 2009 PhD dissertation, “Labor’s New Deal for Journalism: The Newspaper Guild in the 1930s,” and by other scholars, was rejected by many journalists, and this was especially true when the Guild affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and then the Congress of Industrial Organizations. As Mari notes, journalists aspired to the middle class and thought of themselves in those terms. Some journalists were troubled by the involvement of Guild leadership in leftist political causes, and others worried as the Guild sought to expand by representing non-editorial workers. Finally, as Mari notes in his chapters on reporters and their relations with editors, many journalists sought the approval of management. For these many reasons, while the Guild did empower reporters in their relations with editors, and it did lift the pay and working conditions of journalists,
it was sometimes a highly divisive force among journalists within individual newsrooms.

Throughout The American Newsroom, Mari seeks to define the space where news was created—the newsroom. To borrow a phrase from Benedict Anderson, the newsroom was an imagined community, where actors shared a common set of beliefs even if they played vastly different roles in that community. Mari argues that the newsroom was “both a physical space and a symbolic one, a pragmatic place and an idea, especially when examining the history of American journalism” (p. 5). His work substantially contributes to the newer scholarship on newsgathering and adds to our understanding of the dominant news medium of the mid-twentieth century.

Note


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