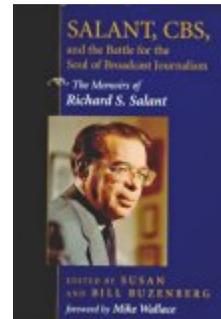


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Salant. *Salant, CBS, and the Battle for the Soul of Broadcast Journalism: The Memoirs of Richard S. Salant*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999. xvii + 326 pp. \$29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-9091-8.

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In my experience media scholars are not enamored with the self-indulgent nature of most journalism biographies. Many of the professional memoirs offer little more than smug encomiums about some magical “news sense” available only to the anointed few. My sense of this issue is that academics would like former media insiders to provide a more expansive critical view of their careers. There are exceptions, and scholars know that journalists are well equipped to bring a critical eye to the task. Part of the problem may be that journalists and scholars operate on very different worlds and the proliferation of name-dropping memoirs only seems to exacerbate the conceptual gap that may exist between the two. That apparent enmity is unfortunate because these groups have a great deal to learn from each other, despite the solidly constructed fence that separates them.

The book reviewed in this case is much more substantive in nature. My recommendation is that you read Richard Salant’s memoirs because he offers insights for journalists and scholars alike. This memoir is also valuable because he gives us incisive and penetrating analyses of his eventful career, but he does it in a way that would be satisfying for even the most demanding media economist. He deals with his energetic tenure as the president of CBS News during the greater part of two decades, ending in the late 1970s. Salant does not use the scholarly vocabulary of the media scholar; instead, he offers conceptual insights about media without using the scholar’s idiom. This book is also well worth reading because it provides an intelligent insider’s view of the political vagaries of TV news during a politically and socially volatile period (1960s and 1970s).

While reading this book my mind kept coming back

to a heated debate between Noam Chomsky and an elite group of CBC journalists. Both sides in this debate were articulate in their own professional language, but each side retained the semantic gap between them, while flogging the other with verbal attacks. This enmity created a missed opportunity as both sides participated in an ideological battle that precluded any useful exchange of ideas. It was clear that both sides shared an interest in developing a more democratic media system. That rancorous debate kept coming to mind as I read Salant’s detailed memoirs. It occurred to me that Salant would have been an ideal intermediary between the often defensive and conceptually resistant journalists and the uncharacteristically bellicose Chomsky. Salant was a deep thinker and a populist who had that rare ability to critically examine his profession without unduly mythologizing the news that his colleagues produced. In that sense, he would be a great moderator for the still-needed debates between scholars and journalists.

At the core of this memoir, you find a sensitive, inquisitive, and highly intelligent news executive. Many contemporary scholars would argue that this description would be oxymoronic in today’s more mercantile news environment. Salant often described his career as a playground of debates that he created by constantly talking with the mighty, and not so mighty, about the job he was doing with his colleagues at CBS News. Add his rare democratic instinct to a long apprenticeship with CBS founder William S. Paley, and you have two decades of what it was like to be the top man at CBS News during an era when possessing that title meant much more than it does today.

This was a period before audience fragmentation, and

CBS was the place to be in major league broadcast news. Richard Salant led CBS through some of its more tumultuous times and was involved in heated political challenges that made his professional life quite interesting. He was also a buffer for his journalists against active White House interventions; it is evident that President Nixon had little restraint when it came to passing along his dissatisfaction with Salant's correspondents. Salant was also a rarity in that he was a conceptual thinker within the ever-expanding profit-centered reality of the news business. This man was also the ultimate broadcast news insider and he both criticized and cherished the news business that he had such a strong influence over. One of the most revealing parts of this book involves his discussion of the deleterious nature of the emerging political economy of TV news near the end of his career and beyond.

Richard Salant's working period at CBS News probably qualifies the halcyon days of network television news. The big three television networks have never had the reach and influence that they had in the days before niche broadcasting and channel proliferation. Salant's career was framed against enormous changes emerging in the political economy of television news. He reluctantly approved the creation of the *60 Minutes* program in 1968, but would have preferred that this program money go to the more ambitious documentaries that he thought would offer more social value for the dollars spent. The recent impact of Michael Moore's documentary work certainly confirms that argument.

Salant was also an uneasy witness to the emerging deregulation of broadcast news; he saw the evolving and disturbing new definitions of the public interest that provided real policy debates during this period. Salant was also a powerful player in creating the new and growing political boundaries for television news—in fact, we are now living with the changes that were starting to emerge during his watch. He was a man who also zealously guarded against the distracting encroachments of glittering production values, music beds for news items, and the other dazzling new techniques that took away from what he thought of as the truth-telling qualities of the news. Salant deplored all narrative trickery that served to bury truth under a commercial canopy and robbed the news of its enduring value in his discerning eyes. One can only imagine how far Salant's contemporary at CBS could go with any current debate about the intrinsic value of truth telling in this highly commercial epoch of conglomerate news interests.

This was a man who had to vigorously grapple with several public, private, and political masters. This juggling act was a by-product of his need to keep up with the interests and complaints of his many constituencies. For instance, if Vice President Spiro Agnew was not holding forth on the journalists as “nattering Nabobs of negativism,” then some South Carolina CBS affiliate owner was vehemently complaining about the left-wing slant of his newsroom journalists. Given the constant heat from all manner of sources, it is rather surprising that Salant parted company with one of his many correspondents only under less than stellar circumstances. But the firing (or resignation, depending on who tells the story) of Daniel Schorr, who later became an NPR public radio news analyst, was certainly one of the more intriguing episodes detailed in this memoir.

The memoirs do not deal openly with the notion that Daniel Schorr was deemed left of center as a journalist. Salant agreed that Schorr had ruffled more than his share of elite feathers, but he was far too good to be cast out in any cavalier manner. Salant points out that Paley was constantly badgered by the Nixon White House to have Schorr fired, and Salant was not immune to overt pressure from Paley to do just that. To his credit, Salant resisted these termination overtures, but he noted that Paley desperately wanted Schorr's troublesome “ass out of CBS News.” In my view the author does us a minor disservice by not dealing with the intriguing area of what Sue Lafky once aptly called the “ideologically unreliable” journalist.[1] Salant makes the case, frequently, that he wants to stay blissfully unaware of the ideological pedigree of his CBS reporters. If they openly revealed their worldviews, he said, he would gleefully send them packing.

In some ways, Richard Salant also lived in a liberal-pluralist bubble and, like most mainstream journalists, he fashions a political world that excludes anything but the most mainstream views. This ideological insularity is not unexpected, but it did prevent any serious conceptual discussions about the structural, cultural, and political qualities of the news. One is forced to be more imaginative in dealing with the hidden ideological agenda represented by Daniel Schorr's less-than-friendly departure from CBS News. In addition, Salant never references any academic works in this long memoir, which is rather surprising for such an astute student of the social and political foundations of the news.

One important contribution of Salant's memoirs is his view that television news was a great moral enterprise for

American democracy. But he also saw the growing need to nurture it because news was rapidly drifting toward more commercial and populist shoals. Daniel Schorr also agreed that freedom of the press needed a diligent defense and, during a less volatile period with Salant, he argued that his boss “stood at the portals, defending [freedom of the press], sometimes against unbelievable pressures ... and through the worst and toughest of these times ... I felt secure in support of a man who may not have felt that secure himself” (p. 223). It is easy to speculate that Schorr was talking about the constant pressure that Salant had to endure from many powerful political figures to fire him—pressure that was long resisted by Salant.

Richard Salant defined news as disobedience in all phases of life, active dissent that can wrench the social fabric. He also saw it as useful reports about life out of focus. His memoirs represent a stark reminder of the changes in the political economy of television news in recent decades. Salant died in 1993, and for many years before that he was in despair about television news becom-

ing just an entertainment vehicle. These were not just the ravings of a retired executive, and Salant clearly proved his mettle by fighting against the growing commercial preoccupation of the news during his era. He also railed against the increasingly commercial production values for news that looked more like the dramatic license exercised by show business types for their fictional representations. He argued that this did not represent the potential truth-value that news should strive to achieve. This memoir makes an important contribution to a debate crossing journalistic and scholarly boundaries, and it serves us in current debates about the democratic quality of the news representations that we receive. One can only hope (vainly, I suspect) that the networks and cable news empires of today will hire more people like Richard Salant.

Note

[1]. S. Lafky, “The Theory and Practice of Educating Ideologically Reliable Journalists,” *Journalism Educator*, 48, no. 2 (1993): pp. 17.

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