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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### NEW HISTORIES OF AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

*Free speech and unfree news: the paradox of press freedom in America.* By Sam Lebovic. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 334. ISBN 9780674659773. \$41.00.

*Newsprint metropolis: city papers and the making of modern Americans.* By Julia Guarneri. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp. 368. ISBN 9780226341330. \$45.00.

*Dead tree media: manufacturing the newspaper in twentieth-century North America.* By Michael Stamm. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. Pp. xiii + 353. ISBN 9781421426051. \$49.95.

Will Irwin worked as a reporter and muckraker for ten years before he wrote *The American newspaper* (1911). Published by *Collier's* magazine over fifteen issues, it was a pioneering study of 'journalism in its relation to the public', and it has been much cited by historians. Irwin argued that American newspapers in the early twentieth century had come to possess enormous power; indeed, 'no other extra-judicial force, except religion, is half so powerful'. Newspapers had been significant influences on public opinion since the early nineteenth century and had become even more important and popular with the rise of 'yellow journalism' in the 1890s. But Irwin worried about conflicts between 'the business attitude', which insisted that newspapers were commercial products above all, and 'the professional attitude', which identified journalism with civic education and the public interest. He was especially anxious about 'the advertising influence', on which newspapers depended for economic survival, and which necessarily damaged their journalism. For when advertisers wanted stories spiked or editorials altered, they generally had their way. And when publishers courted businessmen over drinks and dinner, they grew fat and corrupt. So 'the perplexity of free journalism' was that 'so long as our American capitalism retains its insolence and its ruthlessness of method, commercial publishers of million-dollar newspapers must recognize this [advertising] influence whether they like it or no. And many of them do like it.' Irwin's sense that newspapers claimed to be the people's tribunes but often served their owner's interests made him think that 'the system is dishonest to its marrow'.<sup>1</sup> Thus his study raised some enduring

<sup>1</sup> Will Irwin, *The American newspaper: a series first appearing in Collier's, January–July, 1911*, ed. Clifford F. Weigle and David G. Clark (Ames, IA, 1969), pp. 8, 16, 34, 51, 71.

questions for historians: why were newspapers so powerful? How important were their publishers? Is free journalism ever possible?

Julia Guarneri begins her book *Newsprint metropolis* by focusing on Irwin's readers. Alongside his study, *Collier's* ran a survey that sought to understand what Americans made of the newspapers they read. Ten thousand people responded with all sorts of thoughts, and they mostly wrote about how newspapers mattered in daily life rather than lingering over the influence of advertisers. May V. Godfrey, for example, concentrated not on the ads in *The New York Times* but on its editorials, 'a source of pleasure and interest to me'. Stuck at home with tuberculosis, she still enjoyed 'lengthy arguments with the man who writes them... Occasionally he displays such a lack of insight of information that I box his ears, shake him, scold him because his view-point is not the same as mine.' Another reader was Mr Chamberlain, who explained that he read *The Chicago Tribune* for its journalistic 'depth' and for its cartoons, which 'bring to each one at our breakfast table something needed to begin the day on' (pp. 1–3). From a careful sample of twenty-six newspapers, and from various contemporary critics and social scientists, Guarneri recovers much evidence about the diversity and complexity of American newspaper reading from 1880 to 1930. She argues that the widespread 'embrace of spectacularly commercial newspapers forces us to question the idea that advertising simply corrupted public dialogue', and that American newspapers instead helped to create and sustain 'a new kind of public sphere: more commercial, to be sure, but also more colorful and more inclusive' (p. 7). For Godfrey and Chamberlain and maybe millions of others, this public sphere may not have been an ideal civic space, but it was basically useful, sometimes essential, usually fun. By interpreting readers as both consumers and citizens, and by emphasizing their agency throughout her argument, Guarneri suggests that the significance of newspapers was as much about who read them as about who owned them.

*Newsprint metropolis* provides a rich and comprehensive account that consciously avoids sharp distinctions between the commercial interests and civic claims of American newspapers. Guarneri sees them as 'sprawling, chaotic, and wildly contradictory documents', which made 'a world in which civic dialogue went hand in hand with business boosting' (pp. 11, 53). She explores this world through four central chapters on different cities (Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Milwaukee), each of which attends to particular urban print cultures while also analysing broader questions about class, gender, race, consumption, citizenship, progressivism, urbanization, suburbanization, regionalism, and nationalism. Guarneri demonstrates that all these things were partly mediated through newspaper-generated commercial public spheres. For example, her chapter on Philadelphia shows how newspapers both confirmed and complicated class-specific patterns of behaviour through advice columns. These were often written in ways that entrenched existing norms, but they could also articulate persistent concerns, and 'it was readers,

more importantly, who sought direction on the rituals of city life' (p. 54). Moreover, it was the advertising influence that sometimes expanded newspaper readership by seeking out new customers. For example, the interest of advertisers in female consumption drove the development of daily women's pages (pp. 24–6, 58–62, 70–2).

American newspapers, then, were complex political commodities, which prioritized their commercial interests while professing and sometimes pursuing their civic ideals. An archetype of sorts is provided by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, in which Guarneri finds a 'model of civic-minded, activist, nonpartisan news coverage [that] slowly became standard in mainstream metropolitan papers' nationwide (pp. 106–8). But she also shows that these papers excluded very many stories, prominent among which were the serious accounts of black life that filled black weeklies like *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, and *The Chicago Defender* (pp. 65–6, 97, 131). Guarneri's general perspective is therefore capacious and persuasive. 'The jumble of voices and messages in mass-readership papers did not really merge into a single coherent message,' she writes, 'but they did not need to. As businesses, mass-readership papers worked – they sold products and kept people reading' (p. 72).

Historians of American journalism have often framed the early twentieth century as the moment when the principle of 'objectivity' replaced partisan political commitment as the animating ideal for reporting the news.<sup>2</sup> Guarneri acknowledges objectivity's importance but argues that wider economic changes mattered more, and that newspapers effectively 'traded one set of obligations for another, swapping partisan ties for a more generalized and pervasive commercial influence' (p. 46). Rather than charting the rise of particular journalistic principles, the major historical change traced here is about the transition from one kind of commercial press to another. Guarneri argues that, in the 1880s and 1890s, newspapers provided cities with local stories and local ads while sustaining 'inclusive but not egalitarian' ideas of urban community (p. 103). But during the 1910s and 1920s, national syndication and chain mergers created a more corporate and less heterogeneous press, which sustained a wider mass culture for a more homogenous America.

Politically, this was a transition from progressive urban concern to emerging suburban complacency, so a sense of decline is implicit. Still, Guarneri stresses homogeneity rather than hegemony. *Newsprint metropolis* concludes with both a powerful corporate press and an enormous national readership, which saw newspapers as essential aspects of everyday life (pp. 234–44). In this sense, Guarneri's readers expose the extraordinary range of reasons why newspapers were so powerful. 'Perhaps the political function of newspapers has occupied

<sup>2</sup> The classic study is Michael Schudson, *Discovering the news: a social history of American newspapers* (New York, NY, 1978). For a recent account of objectivity's fate in the later twentieth century, see Matthew Pressman, *On press: the liberal values that shaped the news* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

too broad a section in the limelight of commentary', Irwin wrote in 1911. 'For whether or not politics is boiling, the newspaper goes on day by day with its function of bringing the world to our doors.'<sup>3</sup> Guarneri shows that this world was always already political, that its politics depended on complex commercial public spheres, and that these spheres could sustain both subtleties and silences.

Michael Stamm investigates how newspapers actually ended up at the doors of ordinary Americans in *Dead tree media*. The book approaches newspapers as physical objects made from paper and explores their materiality through an extended analysis of *The Chicago Tribune*. Irwin saw *The Tribune* as an impressive if sometimes dubious newspaper and he described Chicago's journalism as 'technically the best in the United States'.<sup>4</sup> But when Robert Rutherford 'Colonel' McCormick took over as publisher in 1911 his impact was immediate and immense. McCormick saw his newspaper as in part a factory, and he used the Tribune Company to develop a vertically integrated supply chain for manufacturing newsprint that stretched from the spruce forests of Canada to the printing presses of Chicago. This meant buying forests and building factories in Ontario and Quebec, planning new cities where workers could live, and acquiring fleets to move cargo down the St Lawrence river and through the Great Lakes.

McCormick's industrial strategy worked so well that *The Chicago Tribune* became America's highest-circulating standard-size newspaper by mid-century. And yet, Stamm writes, 'it was an overtly and outrageously partisan outlet that was widely and clearly understood to be a platform for its publisher's conservative views rather than fair reporting' (p. 26). From this important example, Stamm offers broader insights into the political valence of American journalism in the twentieth century. McCormick has long been seen as a reactionary maverick, but here he becomes an industrial capitalist like Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, or John D. Rockefeller (p. 109). Newspapers have often been interpreted through histories of consumption, as in most of Guarneri's analysis, but here it is production that becomes the primary focus. In Stamm's account, American newspapers were produced by an industry that was less 'a Tocquevillian foundation of democracy' than 'a strange hybrid of a mass industrial production enterprise like automobile manufacturing crossed with the problem of perishability facing dairy distributors, with the final product often physically given to a reader by a preteen boy laboring as an independent contractor' (p. 48).

*Dead tree media* is a mordant and imaginative book that makes several different interventions. Building on his earlier study of newspaper-owned radio stations, Stamm shows again how newspapers have actively developed new technologies for economic reasons.<sup>5</sup> And, like Guarneri, he contests 'dominant Whiggish

<sup>3</sup> Irwin, *American newspaper*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Stamm, *Sound business: newspapers, radio, and the politics of new media* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011).

narratives' about the rise of objectivity (p. 24). Here *The Chicago Tribune* exposes the enduring significance of the popular partisan press, and Stamm sharply stresses the scholarly neglect of *The New York Daily News*, a tabloid subsidiary of the Tribune Company that had the highest circulation of any American newspaper at mid-century (p. 26). But, beyond these claims, Stamm's most interesting interventions concern environmental and imperial history, for his book is fundamentally about resource extraction and state power. The Tribune Company exploited duty-free newsprint imports under the 1913 Underwood Tariff, controlled access to extensive Canadian landholdings, constructed huge dams for generating hydroelectric power, and successfully lobbied many local politicians (and one bishop) while effectively evading anti-colonial Quebecois activists. By the 1950s and 1960s, the company had diversified its product range to become the world's leading manufacturer of synthetic vanilla food flavouring, which it made from newsprint waste (pp. 216–21). It also became an important aluminium producer, because its hydroelectric power supplies led to profitable partnerships with British firms that had long expropriated bauxite from west African colonies but were now confronted by post-colonial states (pp. 221–34). Thus the Tribune Company did not just publish journalism but also displaced people, destroyed landscapes, polluted rivers, and killed workers.

Stamm reveals much about the environmental and human consequences of manufacturing newsprint from forest resources. He also demonstrates how important wider imperial contexts were for producing American newspapers, and provides a model for how American historians can engage with debates about the relationship between journalism and empire. Still, he is inevitably equivocal about the relationship between *The Tribune's* political content and the Tribune Company's corporate agenda. McCormick's conservatism clearly mattered a great deal, but it was both reactionary and mercurial, so *The Tribune's* politics involved much irony and incongruity. For example, McCormick hated the New Deal and railed against its 'communism' while simultaneously pursuing regional development projects that rivalled the Tennessee Valley Authority (pp. 141–3). His consistently anti-British views animated hundreds of anti-intervention editorials during the Second World War, and these created production problems for the Tribune Company in Canada, but they did not stop *The Tribune* from promoting isolationist arguments in America (pp. 172–4, 204–10). Some of this can be explained through the specific history of American press freedom, on which more below. But in the context of Stamm's argument about newspaper production, the incongruities create difficulties. *The Tribune's* politics were printed on paper but mostly about the wider world, and Stamm carefully avoids seeing conservatism in dead trees themselves.<sup>6</sup> Instead he interprets McCormick's company 'both as a producer

<sup>6</sup> On the politics of paper, see also Heidi J. S. Tworek, 'The death of news? The problem of paper in the Weimar republic', *Central European History*, 50 (2017), pp. 328–46; Jeff Nichols,

of public information *and* as an industrial manufacturer' (p. 243, emphasis added). But what, in the end, should historians make of *The Chicago Tribune*? How did its public information reflect its economic interests?

These questions will always be unanswerable at some level, for *The Tribune's* journalism was multifarious and often individual. McCormick employed but did not control the literary critic Fanny Butcher, the music critic Claudia Cassidy, and the foreign correspondent Sigrid Schultz.<sup>7</sup> But, as Butcher wrote, he was widely and wryly seen as 'our overlord', and his politics were intricate and integral aspects of his newspaper.<sup>8</sup> To understand how, it will be helpful to compare Guarneri's history of consumption with Stamm's history of production. For though *Dead tree media* is a bleaker book than *Newsprint metropolis*, their claims about Chicago are strikingly congruent. Guarneri's fourth chapter shows how *The Tribune* played a crucial part in the creation of 'Chicagoland' as a sprawling suburban region in the early twentieth century. By actively promoting suburban homes in its real estate sections, by relentlessly selling suburban ideals to readers, and by constructing complex networks to maximize regional distribution, *The Tribune* simultaneously advertised about and editorialized for Chicago's suburbanization. Guarneri argues that McCormick's newspaper 'built economies' by cultivating suburban consumers as subscribers and by creating entire markets where everyone 'depended on Chicago information' (Guarneri, p. 186). Her argument that *The Tribune* produced much of its public information to generate business for advertisers resonates directly with Stamm's argument that newsprint manufacturing made Chicagoland possible (Stamm, pp. 109–15). Guarneri portrays *The Tribune* as an expansionary commercial enterprise that achieved regional dominance; Stamm exposes *The Tribune's* aggressive corporate agenda of exploiting natural resources to produce a material monopoly.

Taken together, these studies suggest that McCormick's deepest political fantasy was to create a kind of suburban empire through industrial capitalism. 'Chicago rubs elbows with no other metropolis!' *The Tribune* told its advertisers in 1927. 'In every direction this titan of trade can enlarge its influence to the fullness of its destiny as master market of America' (Guarneri, p. 192). Looming over the metropolis was Tribune Tower, a gothic skyscraper on Michigan Avenue atop which sat McCormick himself, glowering and inscrutable. Below him worked business managers, journalists, editors, typesetters, printers, drivers, and distributors. And scattered across Chicagoland were hundreds of thousands of customers, who read *The Tribune* variously. Some scanned

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'Propaganda, Chicago newspapers, and the political economy of newsprint during the First World War', *Journalism History*, 43 (2017), pp. 21–31.

<sup>7</sup> On them, see Liesl Olson, *Chicago renaissance: literature and art in the American Midwest* (New Haven, CT, 2017), pp. 149–55, 178–87; Hannah Edgar, 'Chicago on the aisle: Claudia Cassidy's music criticism and legacy' (B.A. thesis, Chicago, 2018); David Milne, *Witness to catastrophe: a life of Sigrid Schultz* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Fanny Butcher, *Many lives – one love* (New York, NY, 1972), p. 194.

it briefly and ignored the editorials, while others read these eagerly and came to mistrust the New Deal. Many enjoyed the ads and cut out the coupons. Most voted Republican, as *The Tribune* urged, though it sometimes did so excessively. Thus, reporting the result of the 1948 presidential election, the newspaper famously went to press with the front-page blunder ‘Dewey defeats Truman’. But, during the 1950s, things worked out pretty well for *The Tribune* and its readers. Both were able to imagine and partially create a political world in which people liked Ike, bought much, and read *The Chicago Tribune*. This was what McCormick wanted: newsprint production in Canada driving newspaper consumption across the Midwest, with both then defining the capitalist culture and conservative politics of American suburbia.

*The Tribune’s* politics also depended on particular debates about American press freedom, and these are deftly delineated in Sam Lebovic’s book *Free speech and unfree news*. Through an intellectual and legal history that spans the twentieth century, Lebovic demonstrates that debates about press freedom were always debates about the relationship between the political content and economic interests of American newspapers. He begins by exploring early twentieth-century theorists and journalists such as Will Irwin, Upton Sinclair, Walter Lippmann, and John Dewey.<sup>9</sup> From their debates, Lebovic extracts a distinction between ‘free news’ and ‘free speech’. Free news was an ideal of public information that ensured effective opinion formation. It claimed that widespread access to good journalism was vital for democratic citizenship, and it tried to protect and improve what Lippmann called ‘the stream of news that reaches the public’ (p. 7). This ideal strained against the realities of the newspaper industry, but it still shaped the jurisprudence of liberals like Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, Louis Brandeis, Learned Hand, and Felix Frankfurter.

However, free speech became the dominant legal principle for defining press freedom. This was partly because these principles both appear in the text of the First Amendment, and partly because of the American state’s censorship and propaganda regimes during the First World War. Defining press freedom through free speech meant claiming that newspapers were free when they could say what they wanted without prior restraint from the state, and conservative publishers promoted this definition through the First Amendment.<sup>10</sup> For example, McCormick bankrolled the winning defence argument for prior restraint’s unconstitutionality in the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Near*

<sup>9</sup> Lebovic uses ‘the Lippmann–Dewey debate’ to explore their democratic theories (pp. 25–36), while acknowledging recent doubts about the debate’s utility and historicity (p. 261, n. 57). Cf. Tom Arnold-Forster, ‘Democracy and expertise in the Lippmann–Terman controversy’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 16 (2019), pp. 561–92.

<sup>10</sup> For a complementary history of free speech conservatism focused on labour rights rather than journalism, see Laura Weinrib, *The taming of free speech: America’s civil liberties compromise* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 14–52. On the legal history of press freedom beyond speech rights, see Will Slauter, *Who owns the news? A history of copyright* (Stanford, CA, 2019), pp. 201–7.



v. *Minnesota* (1931). He thought that this ruling would 'go down in history as one of the greatest triumphs for free thought' and he had it carved into the marble lobby of Tribune Tower (p. 48). Hence he helped frame what Lebovic calls 'the paradox of press freedom'. American newspapers could publish whatever they wanted because of 'free speech', but ordinary citizens read commercial products full of 'unfree news'.

This paradox helps explain what Irwin called 'the perplexity of free journalism'. In the context of American capitalism, actually achieving freedom for the news was always unlikely, but Lebovic identifies the 1930s as the most fertile period of experimentation. In terms of direct state regulation, the New Deal tried to develop an industrial code for newspapers under the National Recovery Administration, to legislate for truth-in-advertising under the Food and Drug Administration, and to contest news agency monopolies through anti-trust lawsuits from the Justice Department. But these efforts were met with intransigent opposition by the newspaper industry, which interpreted any state regulation as an attack on press freedom. The industry's leading lawyer was Elisha Hanson, who argued that newspapers should develop their own industrial codes 'not as a matter of privilege to themselves, but as a sacred duty to the public whom they serve' (p. 69). He also saw laws that sought to protect readers from false ads as 'not only unwarranted and unjustified but un-American'. Unimpressed, Henry Wallace observed that such claims 'logically proceed from the amazing premise that honest advertising does not pay' (pp. 73–4). McCormick appears throughout these debates as an influential advocate of defining press freedom simply as protection from state regulation; he explicitly argued that 'the First Amendment was intended solely as a protection of the press against government encroachments' (p. 79). His legal strategy thus reinforced his industrial strategy, because both sought to increase his power by reducing the scope for state oversight. Both also buttressed his broader political agenda, because they set the state against readers and so increased the anti-state conservatism of suburban consumers. McCormick's argument succeeded as constitutional law and *Tribune* readers were often reminded that the greatest threats to press freedom came from the tyranny of the state, always ominous and imminent.

Other experiments in free news took place beyond the realm of the judiciary. For Lebovic, the most interesting challenge to conservative interpretations of press freedom came from the early Newspaper Guild, a union for journalists that embraced the Popular Front's anti-fascist politics. Lebovic argues that the guild pioneered both 'a labor theory of press freedom', which tied free journalism to the employment conditions of journalists, and 'a populist theory of journalistic ethics', which tied good journalism to socialist commitments rather than 'objective' practices. Positioning journalists as workers against their publisher bosses, the guild tried to improve newspapers by forcing class conflict. It certainly exposed hypocrisy, as when guild members dressed up as McCormick and sang songs that spoofed his 'free press line': 'men writing



news aren't entitled to views / Unless they happen to be mine' (pp. 98, 102). But ultimately the guild was never powerful enough to restructure the newspaper industry and it became an anti-communist outfit after the Popular Front collapsed. So, in the shadow of totalitarianism, American press freedom came to seem both indispensable and straightforward. In 1946, a thirteen-year-old New Yorker said on the radio that 'Hitler would have been stopped in his tracks with one free paper' (pp. 139–40). In 1947, the Hutchins Commission similarly celebrated press freedom while recommending better self-regulation for publishers. Lebovic writes that 'reform-minded liberals had come to see an industrialized, corporate newspaper market as a necessary cost of a free press' (pp. 144–5). He also observes that the commission remained too radical for *The Chicago Tribune*, which reviewed its report under the headline 'A "free press" (Hitler style) sought for US: totalitarians tell how it can be done' (p. 148).

*Free speech and unfree news* offers a shrewd study of how conservative publishers used press freedom to serve the interests of an effectively unregulated newspaper industry. But, as Lebovic also shows, new issues arose with the emergence of the national security state in the 1940s, because newspapers were now confronted with dramatic expansions of state secrecy. So the old paradox grew more complicated: 'while there were more and more protections for the right to publish without state interference, it became ever more difficult to access information held by the state' (p. 165). Will Irwin had worried about the influence of advertisers and the First World War had witnessed direct state censorship, but the Cold War generated different debates about journalistic 'responsibility' towards or complicity in American state power. So, though earlier anxieties about the corporate press never disappeared, Lebovic does not delve deeply into the industry's economic stake in foreign policy itself. Instead he identifies the Second World War regime of 'voluntary' self-censorship as an important precedent for the deferential culture of Cold War journalism and shows how this animated new arguments about 'freedom of information'.<sup>11</sup> Still, the old paradox of press freedom had developed under different state architecture, and Lebovic laments the lack of 'a serious debate about the relationship between administrative publicity and press freedom' during the New Deal (p. 62). Instead he emphasizes the importance of elite consensus to Cold War journalism, for which there is plenty of evidence.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, pro-consensus publishers also published the Pentagon papers, and this did mark a decline in deference, though it had limited legal significance (pp. 197–203). The state's secret history of the Vietnam war that Daniel Ellsberg copied and leaked only became public knowledge after

<sup>11</sup> See also Michael Schudson, *The rise of the right to know: politics and the culture of transparency* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> An important new study is Kathryn J. McGarr, 'Gentlemen of the press: post-World War II foreign policy reporting from the Washington community' (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton, 2017).

intense debates at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* about whether to publish at all. As Neil Sheehan noted, the Pentagon papers revealed a national security state exerting power over ‘the public world of ordinary citizens’ by manipulating the press among other operations.<sup>13</sup> The Cold War, then, reshaped the paradox of press freedom without resolving the problems of commercial public spheres. American newspapers were free to publish the darkest secrets of the state, but they often censored themselves, and their coverage continued to be influenced by their corporate owners. They came to depend on individual whistle-blowers inside executive or military bureaucracies, but Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning could still have their freedoms curtailed under the Espionage Act of 1917. So press freedom in America went on protecting publishers while offering few guarantees that good journalism would result.

What is to be done? Lebovic discusses many desirable reforms, including increasing public funding for state broadcasters, introducing indirect subsidies for existing newspapers, passing new laws for limiting secrecy and protecting whistle-blowers, and expanding philanthropic support for independent media (pp. 240–9). And yet American press freedom remains the fraught problem it has been for decades. Irwin fretted in 1911 that philanthropy would produce ‘class publications’ for mostly elite readers and argued that the greater need was for ‘more sane and honest popular newspapers’ that tried to ‘tell the truth in the language of the people’. In the end, he saw no way out of the commercial public sphere. He sought to make this work as well as it could and he thought that newspapers would best advance the public interest by cultivating the profession of journalism. ‘We must go on for a time as we are going at present,’ Irwin wrote, ‘with newspapers published to make money, their investment closely allied to “big business”, with the real producers of journalism arranged in groups, each under the dominance of a capitalist.’<sup>14</sup>

This is what happened, more or less, for most of the twentieth century in the USA. And all these books, in different ways, offer excellent histories of how and why it happened and of what its consequences were. Guarneri, Stamm, and Lebovic offer incisive perspectives on the social and cultural history of newspaper reading, the environmental and imperial history of newspaper manufacturing, and the legal and intellectual history of press freedom. Moreover, these books all steer clear of stories about heroic hacks in hectic newsrooms. Indeed, it is striking how few journalists actually appear here, except as critics of journalism. Instead, the content of newspapers is often subordinated to questions about their consumption, production, and legal status. Particular journalistic principles may have mattered to professional journalists, but together these books suggest that the power of newspapers was ultimately economic.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Paper knowledge: toward a media history of documents* (Durham, NC, 2014), p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Irwin, *American newspaper*, pp. 83–4.

McCormick and his fellow publishers understood that newspapers were commercial and perishable commodities, which could build markets and limit state power to advance conservative politics. At the same time, millions of readers found that newspapers were astonishingly multitudinous media institutions, which could serve advertisers while informing citizens with diverse political consequences. Commercially viable and politically variable, American newspapers were able to contain and manage these contradictions because of the complex ways in which they were shaped and sustained by American capitalism.

The present crisis of the American newspaper industry represents the turbulent disaggregation of a particular political economy. This crisis is both about the very recent difficulty of funding journalism through print advertising and about a broader collapse of legitimacy for the commercial public spheres created by mass-market newspapers. When advertisers stop buying space on physical newsprint, when readers consume news from sundry online sources, and when the profession of journalism cannot be sustained by the industry itself, then much flailing and failure results. In 2016, after years of bankruptcy controversy, the owners of *The Chicago Tribune* tried to rebrand the company as ‘tronc’, though they have since reverted to Tribune Publishing. That year, the company also sold Tribune Tower to two real estate investment firms, CIM Group and Golub & Company, which are currently converting the building into luxury condos. Post-industrial capitalism thus continues to create severe challenges for American newspapers, though some post-industrial capitalists have sensed opportunities. Jeff Bezos bought *The Washington Post* in 2013 and has called it ‘a complexifier for me’, which can somehow be reconciled with his aggressive pursuit of both monopsony and monopoly power and with his recent attempts to develop space colonization technologies with the American military.<sup>15</sup> At the moment, *The Washington Post* makes a profit, partly because of the journalism it publishes and partly because of its lingering prestige as a legacy publication. This latter image was lately boosted by Steven Spielberg’s schmatzy film *The Post* (2017), which you can stream for free if you are an Amazon Prime customer.

<sup>15</sup> Jeff Bezos, ‘No thank you, Mr. Pecker’, 7 Feb. 2019, <https://medium.com/@jeffreypbezoz/no-thank-you-mr-pecker-146e3922310f>.