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Book Review: Roy J. Harris Jr. Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public-Service Journalism Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007. 488 pp. ISBN 978 0 8262 1768 4

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book *Stupid White Men* and releasing his film *Fahrenheit 9/11* are offered as examples of censorship. Yet, as DiMaggio notes, *Fahrenheit 9/11* was ‘the most profitable documentary ever made’ (p. 153), generating \$220 million in revenue, while *Stupid White Men* stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over a year. If such are examples of the marginalisation of anti-war views, one can only imagine what their wide circulation might look like.

For British readers, his characterisation of the UK press does not quite ring true either. Seeking out ‘the more anti-war leaning parts of the British...press’ (p. 218), DiMaggio alights on Robert Fisk’s reporting for the *Independent* and Tariq Ali’s opinion pieces in the *Guardian* as key examples. Quite a different picture would have emerged had he considered the *Independent*’s Johann Hari or the *Guardian*’s David Aaronovitch: both columnists were vociferous supporters of war with Iraq in 2003. It is true that British papers carried far more anti-war commentary about Iraq compared with earlier conflicts. Yet where other analysts have seen this as confirmation of the ‘indexing’ hypothesis, whereby the media reflected elite divisions, DiMaggio explicitly refuses such an explanation (p. 217), preferring to contrast the ‘anti-war’ media systems of other countries with their ‘pro-war’ US counterpart.

Such broad-brush categorisations are not very helpful, but DiMaggio is not really inclined to investigate the politics of contemporary war – surprisingly, since he is a regular contributor to alternative outlets such as *Z Magazine* and *Counterpunch*. At least in part, this is because his overarching argument about media reform gets in the way. Early on in the book he distinguishes the negative propaganda of ‘corporate media’ from positive ‘Progressive-Left media propaganda’, but he argues that the latter is positive because of its lack of influence, rather than because of its political outlook (p. 24). Rather than engage in a political argument, DiMaggio maintains a stance of disinterested pluralism, advocating ‘greater levels of balance’ (p. 217). This is a rather unconvincing argument, since it is by no means obvious why smaller media businesses or greater government regulation would produce better coverage. This logic leads DiMaggio to suggest that CNN was a better (because smaller) outfit under its founder Ted Turner than after its takeover by AOL-Time Warner (p. 308) – a difficult case to sustain in terms of the channel’s actual coverage of war. As George W. Bush’s administration is consigned to the history books, we will need greater political sophistication in understanding the politics of war and intervention.

Roy J. Harris Jr.

Pulitzer’s Gold: Behind the Prize for Public-Service Journalism

Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007. 488 pp. ISBN 978 0 8262 1768 4

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As a measure of journalistic achievement in the United States, the Pulitzer Prizes have long been considered the gold standard – quite literally so in the case of the competition’s

Gold Medal for Public Service. Despite that prominence, according to Roy J. Harris Jr., little has been written about the reporting that went into the winning entries over the years. Harris, a journalist whose father's work once garnered one of those medals, wrote *Pulitzer's Gold* to correct this deficiency, which he contends 'cheats journalists out of their own history' (p. 3).

The public service medal was first awarded in 1917, the year Columbia University instituted the Pulitzers under the terms of publisher Joseph Pulitzer's will. Since then, Harris asserts, 'the Public Service Prize has remained a relatively simple standard for measuring newspaper excellence' (p. 32). As such, he traces its history from that first year through to the present, offering detailed accounts of a dozen winning efforts, shorter sketches of several dozen more, and a valuable index to the entire list of winners.

Harris begins with a section on the more recent winners and an overview of the Public Service Prize; then returns to the early years, the prize's origins and its search for an identity; and devotes his final two sections to 'the golden 70s' (Watergate and the Pentagon Papers taking center stage) and the closing decades of the 20th century.

During his initial research, Harris writes, he was struck by 'how basic journalism practices, even reporting and newsroom management techniques, remained the same over the years – despite technological evolution and ever-deepening newsroom economic pressures' (pp. 3–4).

For scholars of professional practice, this is a notable point. There is an unmistakable continuity in these stories, particularly in the focus on the exposé. Many scholars have argued that aside from the Watergate era and the muckraking period, there was little investigative reporting taking place in the 20th century (see, for example, Aucoin, 2005; Feldstein, 2006; Protesse et al., 1991). Harris's research, however, reveals that investigative reporting has been a persistent force in American journalism, though he does not remark on this important finding.

Though Harris's book attempts to catalog 90 years of Pulitzer history, he makes no pretense of offering a scholarly exploration of the subject. Rather, he presents it simply as a series of case studies that 'recall the irreplaceable role of the press in American democracy' (p. 4). That theme emerges clearly, along with a glimpse of the institutional history of the Gold Medal.

Pulitzer's Gold is aimed specifically at journalists, both students and professionals, though Harris hopes to appeal to 'history buffs curious about the interplay of press and society' (p. 3). He succeeds in those goals while also providing potential grist for the scholarly mill. For historians and other researchers, this book is an important cue to a still-rich area for research into journalistic practice.

One issue of interest that deserves more attention from scholars, for instance, is that of prize culture and how it affects the production of news. Scattered throughout *Pulitzer's Gold*, but all too briefly remarked upon, are some telling insights into the awards process itself.

One Pulitzer juror, for example, discusses the role of recommending finalists to the Pulitzer board: 'Every journalist knows from years of reporting and editing that it's how you write the nomination that counts' (p. 25). Referring to a series of stories that won a Gold Medal for the *New York Times*, Harris writes, 'The *Times*'s entry got the typical polish that the paper applies when it submits work for the Pulitzers' (p. 96). And, regarding the

Los Angeles Times's feat of winning five Pulitzer prizes in 2004 (but not the Gold Medal): 'Even as editor John Carroll acknowledged the prior year's bounty, though, he had his eye on a developing story with Public Service possibilities for the next year's prizes' (p. 97).

Such tidbits raise the thorny question of prize seeking. Harris addresses this in a somewhat cursory manner, acknowledging 'the cult of self-congratulation that some see in the proliferation of press awards'. Mainly, that criticism is dismissed via pat comments such as that from *New York Times* publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr.: 'We don't write for prizes. We are delighted to win them but our journalism is aimed at enhancing society, not winning prizes' (p. 31).

It is possible to interrogate such claims and explore their implications without necessarily casting doubt on the integrity of the journalists involved. Scholars can take some guidance from the recent work of James F. English, for instance, who writes of the prize as an important 'instrument of cultural exchange' that has received too little attention (2005: 12).

Overall, Harris's book is solidly researched, well organized and well written. And for scholars, it will prove valuable for pointing the way to new avenues of inquiry regarding journalistic practice over the last century.

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