

## Review

*Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It.* Edited by Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard. New York, NY: The New Press, 2011, 372p. (paperback) ISBN 1595585486. US List \$19.95.

American journalism has gone through one of its toughest times ever since 2008, as the world financial crisis has taken a cruel toll on the press. As circulation and advertising have tumbled, tens of thousands of journalists have lost their jobs. Publications have folded, and others have cut their output significantly. The lack of an economic recovery means the outlook for the profession remains bleak.

*Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, edited by University of Illinois professor Robert W. McChesney and New York University professor Victor Pickard, presents a broad look at the causes of the current crisis in journalism and possible ways to keep the profession from imploding. The editors have created a readable and thought-provoking collection that shows that despite the current challenges, all hope for the press is not yet lost. The book brainstorms ways to keep the media alive and vibrant in these challenging times. And several of the essays discuss whether the US government can and should do more to keep the fourth estate healthy.

One of the book's strengths lies in its impressive list of contributors. The volume reads like a who's who of media studies. Some of the brightest lights in the field are present, including Paul Starr, Michael Schudson, Yochai Benkler, Michael Delli Carpini, Todd Gitlin, and Clay Shirky. But the editors also include some non-academics with interesting perspectives on the crisis, including journalists, government officials, analysts from think tanks, and two members of the family that has owned the independent *Seattle Times* for generations.

But the book also succeeds by spreading its wings wide to address a diverse range of topics. Many of the pieces deal in one way or another with media economics and whether more direct government support of the American media might be appropriate. Yet the volume also covers a number of other issues that now affect the media and will be key to determining its future, including the role of technology and networks, the influence of race and gender in journalism, and the role of citizen journalists. Several of the 32 essays take a historical approach, which adds value by making the current crisis understandable as part of a larger continuum of ebb and flow in the media.

The book is broken into three parts. The first, "The Crisis Unfolds," sets the scene by reprinting a selection of articles and speeches from 2008 to 2010 that document how the media came to be in its current quagmire. It includes a few must read articles, like Leonard Downie, Jr. and Michael Schudson's seminal "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," from the October 2009 issue of *Columbia Journalism Review*, and Starr's March 2009 *New Republic* article on why our society still needs its newspapers. Taken together, this part of the book creates a first rate overview of the current state of the media industries.

The second section contains mostly original essays that address the "rich series of traditions Americans can draw from as they address the journalism crisis." As in the first part of

the book, in this section covers a broad range of topics, from the roots of postal subsidies for American newspapers, to government attacks against the press, to the role of the ethnic media. I particularly enjoyed those articles on topics that are written about rarely, like Georgia State professor Shawn Powers' fascinating discussion of the role of US government-supported broadcast stations like the Voice of America, and Radio and TV Marti.

Both editors contribute pieces to this section, and both dig up history for possibly valuable lessons. The essay by McChesney, the Gutsell Endowed Professor in the Department of Communications at Urbana-Champaign, concerns Walter Lippmann and the arguments he made in some of his lesser-known works that news be considered a public service. Lippmann's point of view supports the arguments McChesney makes in the first section of this book, in an essay written with frequent collaborator John Nichols of *The Nation*, that governments should step in to support the production of journalism. They argue that because it is a public good, journalism will generally be under-produced by the market without government intervention—a theme that runs through the volume. Pickard, an assistant professor in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication at NYU, writes about the American press in the late 1940s, when relatively radical measures for government support of the media were considered in the post-war period, thanks to a rise in democratic socialist ideas.

And the third section of the book, "The Way Forward," addresses ideas for helping journalism live through the current crisis, again with mostly original essays but also some book excerpts. Here, the approach is less historical and more practical, with emphasis on potential remedies for the problems addressed earlier in the volume. For example, Yale law professor Bruce Ackerman writes in detail of how the government could implement Internet news vouchers, giving support to the news organizations whose articles had made the largest impression on readers. In another essay, now-former Federal Communications Commissioner Michael J. Copps explains how to improve American journalism. His ideas include letting the FCC use its licensing process to help encourage the production of public service journalism and increasing government support for public media—which he points out at just \$1.43 per capita is less than the cost of a cup of coffee. This section of the book also addresses several topics that will be of particular interest to those interested in social justice: the crucial question of newsroom diversity, the attempts of conservative journalists to fight against what they see as the liberal mainstream media, and how to conceptualize the work of citizen journalists.

Overall, the essays—even the short ones—are well written and thoughtful, making the book a good starting point for an examination of the media's current conundrum. If there is any downside, it's that the book never gets into any one topic in great depth, nor does it include suggestions for further reading other than the footnotes. The authors have clearly chosen breadth instead of depth. Also there might have been more female authors. An index also would have been useful. Still, the book would be an excellent choice for introductory courses in journalism or media studies, or for any reader worried about the course of American journalism today. And that should include most of us.

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