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Richard Harwood

Hacks and Heroes

Multi-media corporations have become familiar institutions on our social landscape. Their many arms embrace newspapers, magazines, broadcasting companies, cable TV, films, books, billboards, research and information services, paper mills, recording studios and various entertainment enterprises. A score of them have revenues in excess of a billion dollars a year.

The rise of these companies has been paralleled (on a more modest scale) by the rise of the multi-media journalist with feet in many camps and fingers in many pies. We can encounter George Will on the ABC-TV network on Sunday, in Newsweek magazine every other Monday, on the op-ed page of The Post and a few hundred other newspapers in the course of the week and, occasionally, in the New York Times Book Review on Sunday morning. His own books are in the stores and libraries, and he is a popular lecturer on campuses and in other forums.

His ambidexterity is not entirely without precedent. A century ago the reportage of Richard Harding Davis from battlefields, the royal courts of Europe and the mysterious lands of Asia and Africa turned into gushers of books, Broadway plays, novels, short stories and even a film or two. His biographer, Arthur Lubow, tells us that he "sparked the fantasies of a generation of Americans. Boys and young men dreamed of becoming him, girls and young women imagined marrying him."

The reporters Woodward and Bernstein of Watergate fame had a similar effect on a young generation in the 1970s, but the similarities between the eras end there. Davis, the reporter, was almost alone among newspeople in his success and celebrity. His contemporaries, in the main, were members of an oppressed class. Most of them worked in anonymity and penury without benefit of bylines or the notoriety available to us today through radio and television. The dominating and domineering figures in the business were newspaper owners and publishers—the Hearsts, Pulitzers, Pattersons and McCormacks of the world. The average scribbler could say truthfully on his deathbed, "I'm not a has-been. I'm a never-was."

That has changed. One of the ironies of life in the media corporations today is the reversal in public roles that has occurred. The officers who preside over these great companies, with rare exceptions, are consigned to careers of anonymity in which they come and go invisibly. Not a person in a thousand could name the chairman or chief executive officer of Time-Warner, Capital Cities/ABC, Gannett, Advance Publications, Times Mirror Co., Knight Ridder or the Hearst Corp. We have democratized celebrity and the opportunities for fame and fortune. It is the hired hands—the Tom Brokaws, George Wills, David Broders and Katie Courics—who enter into our consciousness and symbolize contemporary journalism in the popular mind.

There has been another development—the rise of the journalist in the literary world. "Journalism" was once a synonym for hack work. As Rebecca West once put it: "Journalism is the ability to meet the challenge of filling space." But many of its present-day practitioners have progressed beyond that and are now ranked among the leading social and political historians of modern times. This is reflected not only in their daily output but in the books that now pour out of our newsrooms in a steady stream.

Peter Osnos, a former journalist who is now the publisher of Times Books, a Random House division, has made no mathematical computations but is strongly of the view that a "preponderance" of serious non-fiction trade books today are the work of journalists. Stanley Karnow, Nicholas Lemann, William Greider, Taylor Branch, Neil Sheehan, Robert Caro, Lou Cannon, David McCullough, David Halberstam, Gay Talese, William Manchester, Harrison Salisbury and Bob Woodward are among the names he recites. There are dozens of others.

One of the most obvious explanations for their copious output, in the view of Robert Kaiser, The Post's managing editor, is that journalism since World War II has grown increasingly attractive to highly educated men and women who once chose other lines of work. They are paid well and are actively recruited by newspapers such as The Post in the belief that readers now demand more than mere "news"; they also demand the kind of expertise these new recruits can provide.

Book writing, Kaiser believes, provides the "new journalist" with the "intellectual gratification and intensity of experience"—not to mention prestige and income—that many of them require but don't get from the daily grind. So they are sometimes subsidized and usually encouraged at large papers including The Post to take sabbatical leaves and produce books when the spirit moves them. At one time last year, according to Osnos, 14 Wall Street Journal reporters were fulfilling book contracts. That many or more at The Post currently have books underway or in the final stages of completion.

Still, there are problems. An obvious one is the tendency of the journalist who hits it big in the world of books to jump ship and go in for book writing full-time. A lot of them have done that—Tom Wolfe, Talese, Halberstam, Karnow, Caro and Manchester, for example. Another problem is the tendency of the new journalists to want to drown their readers in their expertise. People, as Kaiser notes, may give five or six hours to a book, but they won't give that kind of time to the daily newspaper.

It would be un-American and Know Nothing to wonder if our papers may be getting overpopulated with budding authors and other multi-media entrepreneurs whose special interests may not coincide with the interests of the masses to whom we have always attempted to appeal. So I shan't. We should instead be grateful that they'll be able to converse in the native tongue of the Clintonian policy wonks who are now ascending to power.

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