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This Is America

Breaking News(papers)

When and why newspapers became more liberal, adversarial, and less "objective."

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In the 1970s, Irving Kristol, a founding father of neo-conservatism, declared that most journalists were liberals, who believed that government should regulate corporations, redistribute wealth, and promote civil liberties and civil rights in the United States and around the world. That said, Kristol was also an advocate of interpretive reporting. “To keep a reporter’s prejudices out of a story is commendable,” he wrote; to exclude context and judgment “is to guarantee that truth will be emasculated.” To complicate things further, Kristol acknowledged that journalists had become critical of all Establishment...
authorities, including “trade union leaders and university presidents, the political left as well as the political right,” Jimmy Carter as well as Gerald Ford.

In *On Press*, journalist Matthew Pressman examines the shift from “objective” transmission and deference in core reporting to (often adversarial) interpretation at the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1960s and 1970s. These changes, he demonstrates, were not designed to advance a left-wing ideological agenda. But the mainstream press did become more liberal, more inclined to challenge those in power, and more likely to cover discrimination based on class, gender, and race.

Well-researched, lucid, and engaging, *On Press* helps us understand attitudes toward the mass media (and, especially, financially strapped and embattled newspapers) in the Age of Trump.

In the tumultuous ‘60s and ‘70s, Pressman indicates, objectivity was increasingly regarded as a worthy, but clearly unattainable ideal. Critics noted, for example, that the selection of stories involved the subjective judgment of editors. “The only thing I ever saw that came close to Objective Journalism,” Hunter S. Thompson maintained, “was a closed-circuit TV set up that watched shoplifters at the General Store in Woody Creek, Colorado.” And “straight reporting” of the statements of government and corporate elites, devoid of analysis, created a bias in favor of the Establishment, while giving a platform to demagogues, like Joseph McCarthy. Otis Chandler, owner of the *LA Times*, opined that reporters should ask black looters as well as white psychologists about the causes or urban riots, and environmentalists as well as utility company engineers about the safety of nuclear power plants. Nor should they accept, without independent verification, the word of President Nixon that he was not guilty of any wrongdoing related to Watergate.

Faced with competition from nightly news programs on the three television networks, which had the advantage of immediacy and visual impact, Pressman points out, newspapers had an incentive to describe what happened in greater depth. Defenders of the new norms, which were applied to business, education, religion, and sports as well as politics, made a compelling argument that without context, isolated “facts” could be misleading or untrue.

The “new scrutiny” did not go unchallenged. In a series of speeches in 1969 and 1970, that made him one of the most prominent vice presidents in
American history, Spiro Agnew blasted liberal bias in the selection and presentation of the news. Officials of the Nixon Administration charged the press with “shocking contempt for the truth” and giving aid, comfort, and too much attention to radicals, rioters, and opponents of the Vietnam War.

During the last half century, Pressman indicates, the assumption of left-wing bias in the mainstream media became dogma for many conservatives. Confidence in the objectivity and non-partisanship of the press has plummeted. In 2016, 86% of Republicans declared they did not trust traditional news media. Many Independents and Democrats agree. Since he launched his presidential campaign, Donald Trump has upped the ante with attacks even more vitriolic than Agnew’s. His daily references to “fake news” and characterizations of journalists as “enemies of the people” are especially dangerous, Pressman suggests, because newspapers and television networks face daunting challenges (to their circulation and advertising revenue) from talk radio, cable TV, and online outlets.

Despite their professed devotion to objectivity, Pressman concludes, virtually all “journalists” (a term now loosely defined), for good and ill, now practice “new analysis.” Sources of information have become silos, distinctions between opinion and reportage have been obliterated, and increasing numbers of Americans turn to the news to reinforce the highly partisan views they already have. The New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN, Kellyanne Conway has argued, with some justification, practice “presumptive negativity,” leaping to flaws and falsehoods in everything President Trump says or does. The press exposes Donald Trump for what he is, media critic Jack Shafer has written, but his supporters don’t really care.

Like Richard Nixon, Pressman implies, Donald Trump wants to “break the press,” or, more precisely those in it who threaten him. News organizations, Pressman concludes, “cede the high moral ground of impartiality” when they make it easier for Trump to depict them as “they.” He is right, of course, to
remind us that we have never needed a free and unfettered press more than we do now. But in this toxic political environment it is difficult to see how we can create a culture in which most Americans will read, listen to, and learn from print, on air, and on line news outlets that report, doggedly, factually, and analytically while trying to remain non-partisan.