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**ABSTRACT**

The study of the history of ideas in newspapers has not been separated from traditional journalism history nor from the broad cultural studies of the mass media, and may also differ from the behavioral or statistical study of the effects of the mass media. Because the levels of high culture and popular culture are seen as separate and distinct, the role of the press as conduit between the two has largely been ignored. However, newspapers may be studied to determine whether ideas are defined, transmitted to the popular level, and possibly altered in the transmission process. An awareness of the role of the press in covering ideas in the past prompts consideration of the degree to which the press today transmits ideas to society. The experience of the press in the United States points to its continued role in interpreting those idea-complexes for the public which motivate large segments of society. In both the methodologies of history and of current news gathering, the autonomy of ideas in journalism calls for recognition of a rather well-defined body of material previously neglected, rather than for another system or model. (Author/DF)

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**TOWARD AN AUTONOMY OF IDEAS IN JOURNALISM**

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Most journalism students are told to humanize their news stories because readers are primarily interested in people, things secondly, and, only then, ideas. Considering the attention being paid to ideas, it appears that the same advice has been given to students of journalism history.

Undeniably, ideas--American thought--are recognized as an integral part of the cultural approach to the study of history. Those advocating this approach to the writing of journalism history have specifically mentioned ideas among social, economic, political, and technological factors.<sup>1</sup> These elements will ultimately be synthesized in journalism history, and it would be well if singular attention were paid to the intellectual content of American journalism.

An autonomy of ideas in journalism history is needed, just as intellectual history has become a separate strand of study within U.S. history.<sup>2</sup> An autonomy of ideas does not dictate an internal approach to the study of ideas--involving major philosophical concepts, or the study of ideas for their own sake. The study of ideas in the American press will normally, by the very nature of the subject, emphasize the external or social circulation of ideas. Thus ideas would be traced into their social circulation, the external approach to intellectual history, but with the focus remaining upon the ideas themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Those who have assessed the recent state of journalism history have observed that rather than being on an internal-external spectrum of ideas, current research is off such a spectrum, focusing on individuals, and moving only slightly toward the societal and institutional, where work on the elusive history of reporting may commence. Rather than adding to the complexity of the technological, political, literary, economic, and social elements necessary for the ultimate cultural histories of American journalism, the study of ideas may serve as an integrating or unifying factor. It is in this sense that the study of ideas should become autonomous or primary, not because the ideas are isolated from social factors. In the methodology of both history and of current newsgathering, the autonomy of ideas in journalism does not call for yet another system, model, or interdisciplinary approach, but for recognition of a body of material heretofore neglected.

### I. Defining Ideas

Defining ideas and studying their movement in journalism, and therefore society, may not dictate a new methodology, but still the journalism historian faces congeries of problems. Among the tasks is defining ideas. If the journalism historian sets out to determine the social relation of ideas and the role newspapers play in this interaction, how far back should the idea be traced? Is idea defined by what is initiated at the level of elite thought? If so, does the idea stem from one of the major clusters of thought reflected by Puritanism, the Enlightenment, Transcendentalism, or Darwinism (including social Darwinism)? If not, does it stem from more recent thought such as psychology (including Freudian

thought, such as Cathy Covert is studying), or linguistics? Finally, are values ideas as they would be recognized by intellectual historians?

Sociologist Herbert J. Gans sees journalists' values more nearly as opinions than ideas, although admittedly close to ideas as stated in his definition of enduring values (as opposed to topical values).<sup>6</sup> Of course, there are ideas in his clusters of values: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderation, order, leadership, and, closest to ideas, ideology. This is a normative approach; the question being addressed in this paper goes beyond which ideas newspapers or newspapermen favor to whether newspapers have carried ideas and, whether the social interplay of ideas takes place because of newspapers. John Erickson has recognized the interaction of ideas and values, an integration of ideas and social action.<sup>7</sup>

The problem of recognizing the ideas to be analyzed illustrates that they exist outside of elite thought and may have become altered as they became affected by social action. Despite criticism by elitists, ideas are altered through any social movement, not just by treatment in the mass media.<sup>8</sup> Thus one of the issues which may be examined is whether newspapers act as a conduit for ideas from elite thought to society.

## II. The Problem of Popular Culture

Considering elite culture and mass culture, however, posits the second possible difficulty in developing an autonomy of ideas for journalism history. Jean Ward suggests popular culture--as opposed to Carey's broader cultural

history--as one of the useful new approaches open to journalism historians.<sup>9</sup> (She also suggests quantitative studies, which would seem the very antithesis of a study of ideas. This methodology perhaps could be employed, however, to catalogue the frequency with which ideas are reported or the variations by which they are expressed.) It might appear that the elite culture-mass culture spectrum would parallel the internal-external spectrum of ideas, facilitating the study of ideas through the availability of the increasing body of literature produced by the continuing dialogue between elitists and popular culture adherents. But the vast bulk of this material seldom addresses itself to the news media specifically, and ignores newspapers almost entirely. The mass media in this literature exist as a seemingly understood entity, and the elements are therefore usually not defined. (Elite-mass culture is not the focus of Gans's 1979 book.)

Perhaps these views of mass culture should not be expected to speak to the needs of another discipline, and indeed for the journalism historian seeking ideas, the limitations of this work shortly become apparent, even the work of those who accept mass culture. Those elitists who do not accept mass culture (a group which includes Bernard Rosenberg, Dwight Macdonald, and Ernest van den Haag) tell the journalism historian there are no ideas in newspapers, let alone any that have been altered: "...ninety-nine percent of the material conveyed to us by the mass communications media is aesthetically and intellectually trivial."<sup>10</sup>

Herein seem to lie the ironies in the popular culture approach to journalism history: a major concern of the elitists is that the mass media present a major threat to man's autonomy,<sup>11</sup> just when the journalist sees his role to be the same as the elitists'--to provide mass man with the

information which can free him from social, political, and economic pressures.<sup>12</sup> (That the journalist has been unable to achieve widespread appreciation for this function on the public's behalf may constitute the ultimate irony--that the press is indeed incapable of conveying ideas!) The historian of ideas in journalism will be interested in tracing the reasons for the irony that in the 19th century, the newspaper, as it became a mass publication because of technology, was seen as the agent of literacy and culture. Today, the technology of mass communications is seen as the antithesis of culture. Then there is the irony of finding that perhaps elements of the press, because they carry ideas and cater to an increasingly educated readership, themselves become elite and no longer are the mass media which can accurately be labeled the Fourth Estate,<sup>13</sup> as will be discussed shortly.

Writers such as Herbert Gans, David Manning White, and Edward W. Shils, who do not fear the effects of such an egalitarian culture, offer little more insight than the elitists<sup>14</sup> for the journalism historian cataloguing ideas. Their views may be useful, as Leonard Sellers and William Rivers found, in providing the necessary balance to the elitists. But Leo Rosten, the spokesman they select, attempts to justify the non-intellectual content of the news media at the expense of the idea transmission role they play for all levels of thought: "The intellectual deficiencies of the mass media are a function of the deficiencies of the masses."<sup>15</sup> That the authors of this 1977 book had to reach back to a 17-year-old article indicates just how infrequently newspapers have been examined for evidence of American thought.

When journalism is studied as a part of popular culture, it is frequently done with the characteristic preconceptions that journalists will use only what will "excite, stimulate, and titillate an audience,"<sup>16</sup> a generalization which ignores the work of serious newspapers as well as the First Amendment role of the press of informing the electorate.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the literature of popular culture appears to afford the intellectual historian little assistance, and may even cloud the work as the promising but largely inapplicable studies are consulted.

### III. The Responsibility of the Mass Media

It may be found that not only are the traditional methodologies of history and intellectual history appropriate, but that they offer a philosophical stance which unites elite and mass culture, and journalism history and journalism. Roy Harvey Pearce comments as a humanist on the elite-popular culture dichotomy:

... [the humanist] would understand mass culture so to transcend it. But he would, or should, admit that even he cannot transcend it all the time--perhaps even most of the time. What he wants is to insure that there always will be the possibility for the transcending; in short, that mass culture has a viable relationship with elite culture.

I emphasize: elite culture. Let us not be irresponsible, or cowardly, and call it high culture. Let us not conceal from ourselves the fact that, like mass culture, it must always involve the problem of social status, measured some way or another. For "elitism" carries responsibilities which mere "height" does not. In cultivating his responsibilities--a measure of his dignity--the humanist will perforce cultivate his elitism, and so do what he can to work toward the production of not mass but popular culture.



I suggest that when mass culture is healthy, when a good part of its health derives from the fact that it has a viable relation with elite culture, it is, or could be, popular culture; and that it might well counter, or at least slow down, the forces of depersonalization and alienation which threaten us. I shall suggest that one of the necessary conditions of an authentic community is a popular culture--an authentic people's culture.

In the nature of modern life such a culture--popular or elite--must be accessible to all.

Indeed, anyone who is dedicated to the cause of a genuinely elite culture shirks his duty if he does not also dedicate himself to the cause of a genuinely popular culture, 18.

The wording echoes that of Rosten's:

Responsibility increases with capacity, and should be demanded of those in positions of power. Just as I hold the intellectual more responsible than others for the rigorous exploration of phenomena and the courageous enunciation of truths, so, too, do I ask for better and still better performance from those who have the awesome power to shape men's minds. 19

Pearce anticipates and minimizes the problem of the press's itself becoming elite and thus losing its identification with the people as the Fourth Estate as it traffics in ideas, if indeed he had the press in mind. He is joined by John Higham, who claims the joining of high culture with popular thought may turn out to be the most considerable achievement of new intellectual history. Led by Marie Curti and Ralph H. Gabriel, Higham says, historians have shown that the intellectual history of a democratic society, where no class lines set natural limits to the circulation of ideas, calls for close attention to the processes of popular diffusion and intellectual crystallization. 20



#### IV. The Use of History

The charge of responsibility by Pearce and Rosten to the cultural guardians speaks as much to the practicing journalist as to the journalism historian. Journalists and historians are equally uneasy with any "use of history" which hints of a Whig or any other didactic interpretation, yet those who consider journalists intellectuals in American culture have come to expect a conscious attention to ideas in the American press.<sup>21</sup>

To this point, this paper has implied that newspapers report ideas as circulated by politicians, ministers, or even editorial writers. But do newspapers cover, as opposed to carry, ideas? It is this question to which journalism historians and practicing journalists may jointly address themselves as they consider Pearce's "dedication to the cause of a genuinely elite culture"; in this way journalists may use intellectual history for a systematic coverage of ideas.

The reporter covering ideas may not be interested in tracing ideas back to their Judeo-Christian roots, but will join the journalism historian in studying the role of ideas in American culture.<sup>22</sup> Either may become more proficient in this task through reading or course work in intellectual history, but lack of classroom preparation has not precluded politicians from using ideas, from motivating and manipulating people ideologically for their own purposes. The Nixon administration capitalized on the concerns of voters (as of course would any administration) about the war in Viet Nam, crime, and welfare, to cite themes whose ideological roots go beyond Puritan thought into antiquity. All threatened to erode the American dream. Thus it was largely the political sector, not the press, which anticipated and articulated these ideas; cover stories in news magazines on middle

America or the mood of the country stemmed from political, not journalistic, activity.<sup>23</sup> In short, non-elite newspapers ignored the intellectual ghetto, too, until ferment took physical form, still another example of event-oriented reporting. Journalism roots not only were no deeper into the intellectual community than they were into the social, but were dependent upon the mediating political sector to interpret social thought.

Likewise, the press strives to cover economic news, but usually not with the philosophical background which would give it meaning. John Maynard Keynes is salable on the cover of Time magazine, but may not be integrated into event-oriented reporting. Yet editors and readers alike were prepared in their classroom days to deal with ideas, even those of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and John Kenneth Galbraith. The extent of the neglect is seen when mass market paperbacks circulate ideas more widely in American culture than newspapers.

Integration between events and ideas could be effected in current religious, business, and education thought; ideas generated in universities, in philosophy as well as physics departments, could be reported to all of those who at one time were exposed to ideas daily in the classroom.

To date, only elite newspapers have systematically covered ideas;<sup>24</sup> other editors, for the reasons discussed here, have let readers turn to specialized publications for intellectual fare. But there is ample evidence--outside of popular culture text books--that the mass media are as capable of interpreting ideas for the public as they are the intricacies of the space program--and that the public is as prepared to deal with them.

Perhaps, in the search for historical patterns, the journalism historian will effect an autonomy of ideas which will, as the final irony, facilitate the circulation of ideas within the culture.

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FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," Journalism History, Spring, 1974, p. 4; Hazel Garcia, "'What a Buzzel is This . . . about Kentuck?'" New Approaches and an Application," Journalism History, Spring, 1976, p. 12; Marion Marzolf, "American Studies--Ideas for Media Historians?," Journalism History, Spring, 1978, pp. 14, 16; Jean Ward, "Interdisciplinary Research and Journalism Historians," Journalism History, Spring, 1978, p.17.

<sup>2</sup>The title of this paper is taken from ideas contained in Leonard Krieger, "The Autonomy of Intellectual History," Journal of the History of Ideas, October-December, 1973, pp. 499-516.

<sup>3</sup>This process centers "attention on the experiences of thought rather than external behavior," according to John Higham, "American Intellectual History: A Critical Appraisal," American Quarterly, Summer, 1967, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup>George Boas, The History of Ideas: An Introduction (New York: George Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 3-23.

<sup>5</sup>Krieger, "The Autonomy of Intellectual History," p. 499, describes the social relation of ideas.

<sup>6</sup>Herbert J. Gans, Deciding What's News (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), pp. 39-69.

<sup>7</sup>John E. Erickson, "One Approach to the Cultural History of Reporting," Journalism History, Summer, 1975, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>Boas, The History of Ideas, discusses "How Ideas Change," pp. 44-70.

<sup>9</sup>Ward, "Interdisciplinary Research and Journalism Historians," p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., Mass Culture Revisited (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), p.5.

<sup>12</sup>Herbert J. Gans, Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974), p. 57.

<sup>13</sup>Felix Gutierrez and Clint C. Wilson II, "The Demographic Dilemma," Columbia Journalism Review, January-February, 1979, pp. 53-55, discusses this problem, examining the attempts of the Los Angeles Times to attract a well-educated, affluent readership.

- <sup>14</sup> Conscious ideological thought in America is left to intellectuals, a group which does not include journalists, according to Gans, Deciding What's News, pp. 190-191. The role of news among popular and elite audiences is discussed by Gans, pp. 308-309. Another recent addition to the dialogue between elitists and popular culture adherents is John Pendleton and David Manning White, Popular Culture: Mirror of American Life (Del Mar, California: Publisher's Inc., 1977).
- <sup>15</sup> Leo Rosten, "The Intellectual and the Mass Media: Some Rigorously Random Remarks," in Léonard L. Sellers and William L. Rivers, eds., Mass Media Issues (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), p. 4. The article, stemming from a paper presented in 1959, was earlier published in Daedalus, Spring, 1960, and in Norman Jacobs, ed., Culture for the Millions?: Mass Media in Modern Society (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 71-84.
- <sup>16</sup> Rosenberg and White, Mass Culture Revisited, p. 132.
- <sup>17</sup> Gans, Popular Culture and High Culture, p. 106, recognizes the information role of the press.
- <sup>18</sup> Roy Harvey Pearce, Historicism Once More (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 71-72, 77.
- <sup>19</sup> Rosten; "The Intellectual and the Mass Media," p. 13. The view is similar to that of Marshall Fishwick, "Confessions of an Ex-Elitist," in Ray B. Browne, ed., Popular Culture and the Expanding Consciousness (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973), p. 39.
- <sup>20</sup> John Higham, "American Intellectual History: A Critical Appraisal," American Quarterly, Summer, 1969, pp. 219-233.
- <sup>21</sup> Among those considering journalists among American intellectuals is Edwards Shils. See Jacobs, Culture for the Millions, p. 9.
- <sup>22</sup> The appeal of Herbert Spencer was strong among reporters, according to Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 72.
- <sup>23</sup> This view is supported by Gerald Warren of the San Diego Union, who is a former deputy White House press secretary. Personal interview, Los Angeles, California, January 27, 1979.
- <sup>24</sup> The "Ideas & Trends" section of the Sunday New York Times does not cover ideas in the context used here.

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