Press Professionalization and Propaganda
The Rise of Journalistic Double-Mindedness, 1917–1941

Burton St. John III

ISBN: 9781604977066 6 x 9" Hardcover  Level: College & Faculty

Description

Increasingly, Americans are turning away from the traditional press—especially newspapers—for the news of the day. In fact, by May 2009 a Pew survey revealed that 63 percent of Americans said they would not miss their paper if it ceased publishing. Other surveys have revealed that since the late 1990s, Americans have significant concerns about the mainstream media’s credibility, with no less than 56 percent voicing reservations about the press’s accuracy. At the same time, the mainstream news has continued to show a proclivity for using information proffered by public relations sources; in fact, some studies point to newsrooms that use such propaganda materials for up to 75–80 percent of their stories. As traditional newsrooms continue to either downsize (or, in some cases, disappear) and propaganda materials proliferate, the American public will continue to encounter difficulties obtaining from journalism the accurate and relevant information it needs to make informed decisions within our democracy.

Current scholarship about journalism’s increasing problems with relevancy often focuses on explorations of the advent of new media technologies and/or journalism’s dysfunctional business models. Although those studies are important, they tend toward a presentism that ignores dilemmas that derive from the enduring ways that the press gathers and constructs news. This book argues that the problem of press relevancy can be traced to historical groundings that continue to inform newsroom practices.
Specifically, it makes the distinctive claim that modern journalism’s own professionalism has made the press prone to using propaganda materials, thus contributing to increasing news media irrelevance. Accordingly, this work provides an unparalleled interlocking interrogation of two areas: first, how the professionalizing press of the post–WWI era gradually progressed from resistance to acclimation as regards domestic propaganda and, second, how that acclimation can be understood as part of a historically grounded, self-rationalizing workroom acculturation known as habitus.

Inspired by the works of Pierre Bourdieu, James Carey, and Michael Schudson, this work finds that journalism’s current problems with pertinence lies within an unreflexive relationship with those who would offer the helping hand of propaganda materials. Today’s news media exhibits a double-mindedness: many of the same professional routines it uses to apparently safeguard its credibility also rationalize the use of propaganda as news. This work maintains that news professionals and media scholars need to better recognize how this ingrained, yet dissonant approach to constructing news accounts has damaged the viability of journalism. From such an understanding, the press can better focus on news that is credible, pertinent, and reflective of the wider range of voices in American society.

Press Professionalization and Propaganda is an important book for all journalism, public relations, and media studies collections and scholars in those areas. Professionals in journalism and public relations will also find this book compelling.

About the Author

Burton St. John III is an assistant professor of communication at Old Dominion University. He holds a PhD from St. Louis University and an MA and BA from Wichita State University. He also completed journalism and public affairs studies at the Department of Defense’s Information School in Indianapolis. He is coeditor of the book Public Journalism 2.0: The Promise and Reality of a Citizen-Engaged Press by Routledge. His academic work has appeared in Journalism Studies, Journalism Practice, Journalism History, Public Relations Review, The Communication Review, American Journalism, and the Journal of Mass Media Ethics.