Prophets of the Fourth Estate: Broadsides by Press Critics of the Progressive Era

By Amy Reynolds and Gary Hicks. Los Angeles: Litwin Books, 2011, 208 pp.

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The latest edition of a popular journalism textbook opens a chapter on ethics by identifying the two greatest threats to journalistic credibility. Surprisingly, the author ignores the usual suspects that dominate most discussions about the current state of daily journalism: an increase in factual errors and fabricated stories; a decline in serious, in-depth reporting; the fear that partisan spin is replacing fact-based verification. Instead, the book reaches back in history to highlight two problems that have been a source of debate for more than a century: the influence of advertisers, and the use of sensationalism to sell the news.

Amy Reynolds and Gary Hicks should be pleased by those choices. In *Prophets of the Fourth Estate: Broadsides by Press Critics of the Progressive Era* , the authors focus on press critics in the Progressive Era who first warned of the dangers posed by an overly commercialized press. Reynolds and Hicks believe the arguments critics made back then resonate now. They question whether a fully commercial and corporatized press can fulfill its constitutional role in the democratic process. With their book, the authors hope to revive interest in the work of several "prophets" who raised the same question when modern journalism was in its infancy.

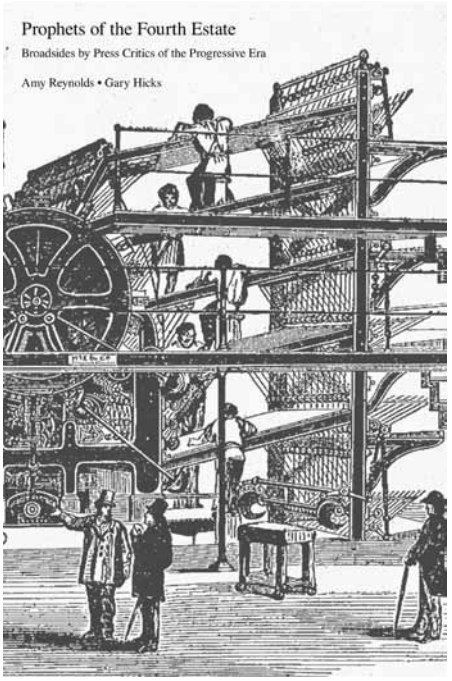
The authors acknowledge their debt to Marion Tuttle Marzolf and her 1991 book, *Civilizing Voices*, which investigated the role press critics played in shaping the "new journalism" that emerged during the industrial revolution. As the nation transitioned from rural to urban, advertising grew dramatically, and big-city newspapers flourished. The press shed the last of the partisan financial ties that had once dominated American journalism and emerged as an independent and profitable business. Reynolds and Hicks provide a readable overview of the period and profile several leading press critics. The primary sources make this book particularly valuable. The authors publish full-length articles that appeared a century ago, yet address issues that are hotly debated today.

For example, the muckraking journalist Charles Edward Russell decried the rising power of business interests to shape the news. In a piece called "The Keeping of the Kept Press," published in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1914, Russell argued

that the Wall Street barons of his age—the leaders of the railroad and banking industries—dictated news judgment by exerting control over the newspapers' advertisers, most of whom depended on the banks for credit. In Russell's view, big business had "erected in America a censorship of the daily press that in plain terms is as strict as any government censorship" (p. 54).

In a chapter on propaganda and the rise of public relations, Reynolds and Hicks publish two articles that questioned whether journalists had the resources to combat the influence of sophisticated press agents. Writing in the *Independent* in 1918, Donald Wilhelm complained that greedy railroad executives used press agents "as a kind of camouflage corps" to manipulate newspaper reporters and create public panic over a coal shortage that did not exist (p. 174). Roscoe C. E. Brown took the argument further. In the *North American Review*, he called public relations a "menace to journalism" and encouraged newspapers to boycott press agents altogether (p. 182).

Oswald Garrison Villard is perhaps the best known of the critics highlighted in *Prophets of the Fourth Estate*. As editor of the *Nation*, Villard would establish a tradition of media criticism at the magazine that thrives to this day. In a piece published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1919, Villard attacked the rise of newspaper chains and corporate ownership of the press. To regain their lost credibility, Villard said newspapers must avoid the "drift toward consolidation on a resistless economic current, which foams past numberless rocks,



and leads no man knows whither" (p. 159).

In the debate over whether corporate-owned journalism can serve a healthy democracy, the authors appear to fall firmly in the camp of such skeptics as Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols. There is ample evidence from the past century to support that skepticism. But the issue is not clear-cut. Consider the current plight of newspaper readers in Philadelphia. For decades, the *Inquirer* served as a cash cow for a corporate chain, but also produced some of the toughest watchdog journalism in America. Now facing bankruptcy, the paper is a ghost of its former self, and its survival depends on the tender mercies

of a local ownership group led by political and business leaders who were once subjects of that watchdog journalism. This is not to absolve the *Inquirer's* former corporate owners of any responsibility for the paper's current plight, but simply to point out the complexity of the issue.

A century removed from the Progressive Era, the debate over commercialism, journalism, and democracy continues. *Prophets of the Fourth Estate* illuminates the origins of that debate, and is thus a valuable resource for both the classroom and the general public.