

# How journalists cover themselves : a survey of research on media journalism and media criticism in the United States

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## HOW JOURNALISTS COVER THEMSELVES: A SURVEY OF RESEARCH ON MEDIA JOURNALISM AND MEDIA CRITICISM IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States looks back to a centuries-long tradition of media criticism in the mass media. Since the Internet and numerous mergers among media conglomerates have started to change the media landscape profoundly, even more mass media discuss journalism and media issues now publicly. However, research on the phenomenon of media criticism and media journalism in the U.S. is scarce. This article provides an overview on the history of media journalism in the United States and the academic literature available in this field.

*Keywords:* Media Journalism; Press Criticism; Journalism History; United States.

While the concept of mass media criticizing other mass media is still pretty new or uncommon in Europe, journalism in the United States looks back to a long tradition of mass media covering journalism and the media business. «Muckrakers» were investigating the media business as early as 1911. Many well-known journalists, among them Walter Lippmann, voiced media criticism in the 1920s; and when a group of leading intellectuals, the «Hutchins Commissions», called for a more responsible press in the 1940s, they triggered an intensive debate about media ethics in the mass media. Since the mid-nineties, the U.S. mass media have witnessed an explosion in the field of media criticism and media journalism — due to the rising significance of mass media for society, the number of large-scale media mergers terrifying many spectators, and the arrival of new media technologies, especially the Internet.

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Today, leading newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe* regularly offer in-depth reports on journalism, the media business, and media ethics, as do magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. In 1998, a «media consumers' magazine» called «Brill's Content» was successfully introduced. And while the broadcasting media still shies away from shining a spotlight on the media — with the laudable exception of CNN's «Reliable Sources», the National Public Radio's weekly radio show «On the Media» and some productions with a regional focus like «Beat the Press» on the Boston area's public television — many on-line media have established themselves as media critics recently. Among them are magazines such as Salon.com and Slate.com which emulate established journals such as «The Atlantic Monthly»; media consumers' sites such as Newswatch.org; and web sites for media professionals like Inside.com and Newyorkpress.net. Jim Romenesko, who runs a media criticism-only Web-site for the Poynter Institute with dozens of useful links, counts approximately 100 media journalists and media critics in the United States by now ([www.poynter.org/medianews](http://www.poynter.org/medianews)). In March 2000, the *Columbia Journalism Review* published a special edition on the booming media criticism beat. In the editorial, James Boylan stated, «At the turn of the century, media critics are blossoming like spring.» (Boylan 2000: 34-35)

However, research on media journalism and media criticism in the United States has not kept pace with the rapid expansion of the genre. Instead, there is still astonishingly little academic literature on the subjects, effects, and authors of media criticism in the mass media. This article will provide a comprehensive overview of relevant U.S. studies in mass communications dealing with media journalism and media criticism in the mass media.

### Media Critics and Criticism: A Brief History

Since the 1960s, some research on the history of media journalism and media criticism, as well as on single high-profile media critics, has been done. A number of articles have appeared on the works and lives of prominent media critics such as A.J. Liebling of «The New Yorker», who was active in the 1950s and 1960s, Upton Sinclair, author of «The Brass Check» (1919), George Seldes, publisher of the newsletter «In Fact» during in the 1930s and 1940s, and William Cowper Brann, journalist and

editor of the «Iconoclast», a magazine that regularly contained media criticism and was published in the last decade of the 19th century. (Rivers 1958: 433-438; Hausmann 1967; Grenier 1972: 427-436; Midura 1974; Blanchard 1977, 1978: 33-37, 54-55; Dickerson 1978: 42-45; Brown 1989: 85-102; Daley 1996: 5-20) Brown (1974) and Marzolf (1991) have produced informative volumes on many aspects of the history of media criticism.

Rubin was among the first to study the content of media criticism. He compared the topics of media criticism voiced in the U.S. between 1859 and 1963 and found out that the subjects have remained the same over the course of the decades — although the media environment changed so rapidly in those one hundred years. The six «eternal themes» of media criticism which Rubin identified — and which still sound surprisingly up-to-date with respect to today's media — are: The sensationalism, triviality, and cult of personality in the media; the reporters' frequent invasions of the private spheres of people; the oligopolistic structure of the media industry; that the media content is tailor-made to please advertisers; that media owners are hostile to guilds and employees; and that news agencies dominate the content of the news. (Rubin 1975)

### Media Criticism and Media Self-Control

In 1968, the Republican Richard Nixon was elected U.S. President. Nixon, who had an uneasy relationship with the media, launched a series of attacks on press and media freedom, eagerly supported by Vice President Spiro Agnew. However, the late sixties and early seventies was also a time of rising public disenchantment with «sclerotic» institutions in the U.S. — with the media being considered one of them.

The media reacted to Nixon's and Agnew's attacks and to the continuing loss of public confidence by introducing several new forms of self-control. In 1967, the first ombudsman was appointed by an American newspaper. Since 1968, more than two dozen local journalism reviews have been founded. In the early seventies, the alternative press began to criticize the established mass media, and in 1973 the National News Council started to monitor the national media. Although most journalism reviews and the National News Council did not survive the mid-eighties, those new forms of media self-control inspired a number of studies in mass communications.

An extensive body of academic literature now exists on the tasks and achievements of ombudsman in American newsrooms. However, some scholars also voiced suspicions that ombudsman merely function as PR tools. (Hartung, Jacoby and Dozier 1988: 914-919; Ettema and Glasser 1997: 3-12, 40; McKenna 1993: 41-44; Pritchard 1993: 77-86) The rising use of ethics codes since the 1920s, which again flourished in the 1970s, has also been studied widely. (Boeyink 1984: 893-904; Cronin and McPherson 1995: 890-901; Pritchard and Peroni Morgan 1989: 934-941) In addition, literature exists on the rise and fall of the National News Councils and other media councils (Barrett 1972: 54-56; Blankenburg 1969: 14-17; Brogan 1985; Hermanson 1993: 847-970; Isaacs 1986, 1970: 16-26; Kriss 1974: 31-38), whereas little research has been done on the rise and fall of journalism reviews and on the media criticism in the alternative press (Dennis and Rivers 1974), especially the *Village Voice* in New York and the *Boston Phoenix*, which were pioneers in the field of alternative media criticism in the early seventies.

### Negativism and Lack of Credibility

In the early eighties, a number of media scandals happened in leading national media. There was the «Jimmygate» scandal, a faked story about a presumed eight-year-old drug addict, produced by the Washington Post reporter Janet Cook, and awarded a Pulitzer Prize — before it became public that the whole story was a lie. The courts dealt with libel suits, involving CBS and Time Magazine, who were sued by the high-profile military politicians General Westmoreland and Ariel Sharon for distorted reproductions of interviews they had given. Moreover, a Wall Street Journal reporter was sued for illegal use of insider information. Due to the rising number of «media scandals» like those mentioned above, even more journalists started to report on the media and on issues of journalism and media ethics. Alarmed, media companies ordered four large-scale studies on media credibility, which were conducted in 1984/85 (Gaziano 1988: 267-278).

Robinson conducted a content analysis of articles in the mass media dealing with journalism and the media in 1983 and found that 47 percent of the articles analyzed were negative. Only 16 percent portrayed the media in a positive way; the rest were neutral in assessing the media. «First, the press consistently emphasizes the bad news about itself. The nationals cover themselves the way they cover all institutions — negative-

ly», Robinson wrote. He argued that this negative way of reporting on the media might encourage those who ask for more media control. «[...] Second, critical as they are, the nationals cover themselves in a self-interested, self-serving way. Print reporters accentuate the bad news associated with television. The national prestige media give bigger play to problems afflicting the local press. [...] As a rule, neither CBS nor any other medium played up its own problems. As a rule, each source hyped the other guy's problems or downplayed its own.» Robinson called the *Washington Post* the only exception, as it regularly exercised sharp self-criticism in public. (Robinson 1983: 31-33)

In 1986, Robinson additionally compared results from polls about the media from the 1980s with similar polls from the 1930s. Surprisingly, he found that the public's opinion about the media was very stable over the course of time: In both decades, a third of those interviewed believed the news media would slander or falsify news. Robinson stated there is «[...] a belief that our own time is uniquely complicated and contentious. We regard the past nostalgically, as a quaint time when things were better [...]» (Robinson 1986: 44-45)

Culbertson and Thompson have compared the Columbia Journalism Review's (CJR's) attitude towards the media with those of *The Quill*, the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists, and found the CJR to be more critical towards the media. (Culbertson and Thompson 1984: 12-21) Fridriksson analyzed the «Darts and Laurels» column in the Columbia Journalism Review between 1963 and 1983 and found out that journalists' conflicts of interest and ethical lapses were highlighted by this column. (Fridriksson 1985: 2-7)

### Media Criticism in Campaigns, Effects of Media Mergers

In the decade after the end of the Cold War, U.S. media — even the leading quality media — have often been scolded for becoming more and more trivial, and for publishing too much fluff and gossip. The cases of O.J. Simpson, Lady Di, and Monica Lewinsky became «media scandals» as well. Many large media companies merged with even larger media conglomerates and created a fear that journalists' freedom might soon be threatened. The arrival of the Internet forced media companies to reconsider their strategies. All this has been good «feed» for media journalism, which has flourished in the U.S. since the mid-nineties.



Jack Lule analyzed how the media reported on the «Norplant scandal» in 1990, when the Philadelphia Inquirer published an editorial suggesting that poor black women should be implanted with the long-term contraceptive Norplant free of charge to reduce birth rates among lower-class groups, and therefore help eliminate poverty. The debate whether it was ethical that the newspaper published this editorial reached a national level, and allowed the public a rare glimpse into the inner workings of a newsroom, i.e., the division between the editorial department and the newsroom, which distanced itself from the editorial in the «Norplant» case. (Lule 1992: 91-109)

In 1992, Johnson and Boudreau studied the rising significance of media journalism during presidential election campaigns. This same year, already eight percent of the whole election reporting belonged to the category «media journalism/media criticism», according to the scholars. They also found that a high percentage of articles related to media and journalistic issues appeared during the primaries — filling the public's need for detailed information on the political process, but also serving as a «stop-gap» in times when the campaign moved on slowly, and journalists lacked other interesting subjects to report about or to analyze. Johnson and Boudreau confirmed Robinson's thesis that most of the articles had a negative slant: «By criticizing their performance [...], journalists may be portraying themselves as largely irrelevant to the election process, and undercutting their ability to cover the campaign effectively.» (Johnson and Boudreau 1996: 657-671)

In spring 1995, the Freedom Forum Media Studies Journal published a special issue on media journalism and media criticism. The issue contained a study which — based on a group of media managers — sought to identify the most influential media critics of the mid-nineties. Those leading media critics were Jonathan Alter from Newsweek, Ken Auletta from The New Yorker, Jeff Greenfield of ABC, Jon Katz, formerly of Wired, Howard Kurtz and Tom Shales from the Washington Post, David Shaw and Howard Rosenberg from the Los Angeles Times, and the notorious talk-show host Rush Limbaugh. (Snyder et al. 1995: 1-18) The volume also contained an article on the lack of media journalism outside «media metropolises» like New York and a few other big cities. (McMillan 1995: 59-66)

The numerous merger activities involving Time Warner have been subject of several studies. Turow analyzed in 1994 how news sources reported about themselves; among the media analyzed was Time magazine and its

coverage of media products from Warner Communications — with which Time had merged not long before Turow's study. The interviews with journalists conducted by Turow show how difficult media reporting can be in a large media conglomerate. (Turow 1994: 29-46) In 1995, Pieper and Hughes studied how CNN, Time, Newsweek, Broadcasting & Cable, and The Nation reported on the announced merger of Time Warner and CNN/Turner Broadcasting. According to them, the sheer size of the merger and the economic advantages for the companies were widely covered by CNN and Time, whereas they shied away from reporting on the consequences for media politics and media ethics, and on the reactions of Time Warner shareholders and employees, while Newsweek and The Nation covered the merger more critically. (Pieper and Hughes 1997)

## Conclusion

In Germany, media journalism obviously has become a «fashionable» object of study among scholars of communications recently.<sup>1</sup> In the «old world», media journalism in the United States is often lauded for a degree of transparency and self-criticism still unusual in most European media. However, this willingness of many media to criticize themselves might not only be traced back to a more «professionalized» field of media journalism and media criticism, but also to different cultural norms in the United States in general: Criticism, especially from peers, is accepted in a rather «sportive» manner — not only in the media, but also in the field of academia, for example.

While media criticism has attracted more and more interest in the mass media for some years now, U.S. scholars of mass communications obviously have not discovered media journalism as a «hot» topic yet. There is no up-to-date content analysis; no current study on the reception of media criticism is available; and no substantial discussion seems to be going on among academics as to whether or not media criticism can be regarded as a useful means of media self-control that so many people constantly cry for in the wake of «media scandals» like those involving O.J. Simpson, Lady Diana, and Lewinsky. The prophet counts for nothing in his own land

<sup>1</sup> For example, there is currently a rise of M.A. theses dealing with media journalism. Also, scholars Klaus Beck and Kyung-Jin Choi have provided content analyses of mass media articles dealing with media issues.



— this old saying seems to be true regarding the phenomenon of media journalism in the U.S. mass media being much more interesting to European than to American media scholars. (Russ-Mohl 1994: 252-259<sup>2</sup>)

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<sup>2</sup> A study of leading media journalists in the U.S. has been conducted by the author of this article for her Ph.D. thesis on media journalism in the United States.

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