

Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865–1920. *By Richard L. Kaplan.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. vii + 224 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, tables, graphs. Cloth, \$60; paper, \$20.00. ISBN: cloth 0-521-62151-8; paper 0-521-00602-3.

Reviewed by Thorin Tritter

The central question in Richard Kaplan's new book, *Politics and the American Press*, is, Why did American newspapers in the 1880s and 1890s drop their allegiance to political parties, adopt an independent status, and embrace objectivity? While ostensibly a topic for journalism scholars, Kaplan's study should be of interest to business historians, as he finds his answer by looking at the economic and market forces working on both parties and the press.

In short, he claims that in the 1860s and early 1870s, when party affiliation among readers was high and when competition within the industry was intense, publishers recognized that the rational way to maximize readership was "not to adopt a 'generalist' marketing strategy of an undifferentiated, politically neutral market appeal, but instead to pursue a specialized, partisan one" (p. 68). Newspapers therefore embraced party affiliations and biases. However, beginning in the 1870s, a new group of publishers started cheap papers that catered to the mass of workers whom earlier publishers had ignored. Older papers responded by appealing to these groups, reducing their attention to politics, and eventually buying up the new competition. Kaplan claims that these results, spurred by concerns with market share, meant newspapers shifted "their focus from the dramatic spectacle of partisan combat" (p.129).

Still, according to Kaplan, newspapers across the country retained at least some traditional ties to party commitment until the 1896 presidential election and the political realignment that followed. In the wake of the Democratic Party's nomination of Populist William Jennings Bryan and adoption of a plank to monetize silver, says Kaplan, Democratic newspapers, fearing inflation and widespread economic upheaval, "fled the party in a mass exodus" (p. 145). William McKinley went on to win in a landslide and, according to Kaplan, "effective party competition died out" (p. 150).

This decline in political rivalries gave both parties new reasons to distance themselves from the press. The dominance of the Republican Party meant it no longer saw a need to call all journalistic resources into service for elections. Meanwhile, the minority Democrats backed away from newspapers as they launched an attack on party machines and pushed for political reforms in an effort to broaden their electoral appeal.

Economic and political forces, claims Kaplan, also led newspaper owners to break any lingering partisan affiliations. "Parties," he writes, "no longer possessed the capacity to define the political identities and loyalties of the populace" (p.150). Thus, publishers recognized that "ritual affirmations of party fealty would only hinder, not help, [a] journal expand its market share" (p.150). Instead, they adopted the Progressive Era ideology that opposed pure party-line voting. In this way, publishers claimed a new role for the press. Henceforth, newspapers would provide the necessary information to educate voters and enable them to fulfill their civic duty. Without the old party allegiances and mouthpieces, the press would bridge the gap between citizens and politicians.

Kaplan does not end there but goes on to describe the shift to "objective" journalism as damaging to America. In a passionate chapter that, at times, seems unrelated to his earlier historical analysis, he claims that the "posture of independence from politics is illusory" (p. 194) and that correspondents are "less often governmental watchdog than lapdog" (p. 193). In particular, he says that reporters seeking hard facts largely rely on those in positions of power and the leaders of the two major parties, leaving out large segments of the population. Kaplan's final call is for a more democratic press that would "offer new grounds for engagement to a citizenry which sees itself as marginal to the currently contrived debates of politicians and media professionals" (p. 196). He believes there is a need to reemphasize connections, described in his earlier chapters, between the press and the public sphere that existed in the nineteenth century.

Kaplan pointedly introduces this engaging and well-written narrative with a sharp critique of several other scholars who have explored the press's move away from party affiliation. In particular, his evidence shows that Michael Schudson's well-known book, *Discovering the News* (1978), which described the rise of independent journalism in the 1830s, misdates the transition by at least sixty years. The partisan press, as Schudson

now acknowledges and as Kaplan demonstrates, remained vibrant well into the 1870s and 1880s. Kaplan also contrasts his approach with that of Gerald Baldasty, whose *Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (1992) argues that advertisers, as they replaced political parties, reshaped newspaper content for their own interests. The weakness in Baldasty's work, according to Kaplan, is his disregard for the continuing connection between the press and politics, even after the decline of nominal party affiliation. As Kaplan demonstrates, a concern for profits did not exclude political advocacy and actually worked hand-in-hand with partisan support in certain markets. Finally, Kaplan seeks to correct omissions in the work of Michael McGerr, whose *Decline of Popular Politics* (1986) argues that elite reformers changed the style of the press, leading to a drop in voter turnout, because of their own genteel concerns. Kaplan agrees with McGerr about the central link between the press and voter participation, but claims that he ignores the continuing importance of politics to the press, even once it was freed from party allegiances. Even after 1896, newspapers, according to Kaplan, were not removed from the contentious arena of public debate but used the ideal of objectivity to create a new role within it.

Noticeably missing from Kaplan's historiographic introduction is the work of David Mindich, whose *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (1998) seems particularly relevant to this study. In contrast to Kaplan, Mindich describes the evolution of "objectivity" between 1830 and 1890, tracing the development of ideals such as detachment, nonpartisanship, and empiricism among editors over the course of the nineteenth century. Mindich demonstrates that objectivity did not burst onto the scene fully grown, as Kaplan claims, in 1896, but was an ideal that had been discussed and considered by newspapermen for at least sixty years. While Mindich does not consider the economic or political factors that Kaplan describes, he does suggest a middle road between Schudson and Kaplan.

More problematic is that Kaplan makes claims about changes in the American newspaper industry but relies on research that applies solely to Detroit. The fact that neither Kaplan's title nor any of his first fifteen pages mentions this narrow focus is both confusing and misleading. This is actually a book about Detroit's newspaper industry and how the economic and political forces within one city shaped the development of a

local, independent press. While some of the forces that acted on Detroit's papers represented national trends, Kaplan does not have evidentiary proof to back up this claim. New York City, for one, certainly experienced the rise of cheap papers that reached out to previously ignored residents well before 1870, when Kaplan claims this happened in Detroit and resulted in declining attention to politics. Kaplan's book is of no less value because of its focus on Michigan's largest city, but it would be appropriate to consider how representative his examples are of a more general pattern.

Despite his preoccupation with Detroit, he omitted a noteworthy book on that city from his bibliography, Gerald Baldasty's *E. W. Scripps and the Business of Newspapers* (1999). Kaplan turns frequently for evidence in his argument to the Scripps brothers and their holdings in Detroit, including the *Evening News* and later the *Detroit Morning Tribune*, but he does not draw from Baldasty's elaborate research into this family's chain operation.

Overall, however, Kaplan effectively combines the too often disparate studies of business, political, and journalism history to produce an important text about the American newspaper industry. He succeeds in demonstrating that the press holds a unique place in the world of corporate America as it straddles the line between private interests and public needs.

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