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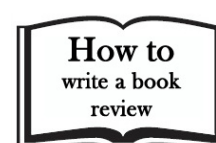
## Book Review: *The Media and Public Life: A History* by John Nerone



*In **The Media and Public Life: A History**, John Nerone details the emergence of journalism as a practice grounded in the representation of public opinion, positing a number of key transformative moments in its evolution. Exploring the tensions between the ideal of the journalist as a public intellectual and the realities that jeopardise this role, Nerone presents an interesting and thought-provoking read, writes **Elizabeth Folan O'Connor**, producing insights that, while occasionally general, extend beyond the book's predominant US focus.*

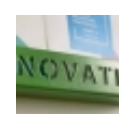
***The Media and Public Life: A History.* John Nerone. Polity. 2015.**

In his own words, John Nerone's book, *The Media and Public Life: A History*, is a 'curious' history that 'sits at the intersection of the history of the public sphere, journalism history, and normative media theory'. Partly 'a social history, partly a history of institutions, and partly a history of ideas', the book closely examines the role of journalism as it evolved into a set of practices involved in 'the representation of public opinion'. This matters because:



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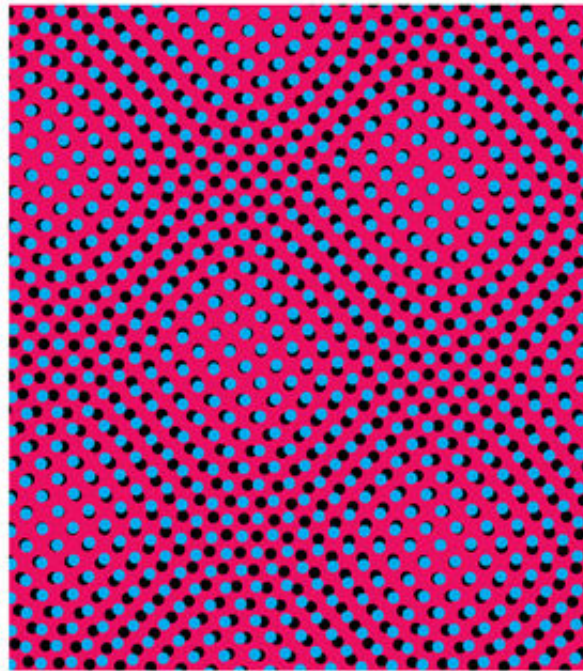
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*In any political order, there has to be a mechanism that makes sense out of things by sifting through information in a way that can be presented publicly as both worthy of guiding policy and as the sort of thinking that really represents the way the public thinks and the way people would think if they had enough time and knowledge.*

New Directions in Media History

## The Media and Public Life: A History

John Nerone



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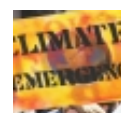
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Just how well the practice of journalism achieves this role of being a 'public intellectual' throughout news media's long history is the main thrust of the book. Journalists should represent the public because public opinion really does matter in governance. For this reason, the 'people who run things accept the fact that they have to answer to a universal supervising intelligence that is represented by journalism'.

However, as Nerone argues from the outset, this notion of journalism as a 'universal supervising intelligence' is a 'regulative fiction' that journalists too easily buy into for a variety of reasons that do not ultimately stand up to scrutiny. The brutal reality, he argues, is that the people who run things no longer need a journalist or editor to represent the public. Today, he argues, there are powerful databases that do this job for them. He writes:

*In every age of modern history, some innovation has produced the kind of fantasy that Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries expressed about the newspaper. But these*

*fantasies always crash against brutal reality, and every media technology gets captured by entrenched forces – authoritarian governments, exploitative corporations, violent extremists.*

After establishing this tone, Nerone then sets about systematically proving his overarching thesis against the backdrop of developmental themes he describes as key transformative ‘moments’ in media history. After a brief history of the invention of the earliest printing presses in Asia, the timeline shifts to Renaissance Europe through to the age of revolution in the new world, followed by its politicisation, commercialisation and industrialisation, before an analysis of the twentieth century’s high modern moment and its transition into the late modern age we are in today, including the digital ‘revolution’. His goal in tracing each of these developments – which, although roughly chronological, ‘don’t stop operating when another emerges’ – is to highlight the complexity of the ‘networks of relationships’ that altered the practice of journalism with each new transformative moment.



Image Credit: Newspapers in Black and White (Jon S)

Shuttling ‘between two different kinds of voices that is partly abstract and partly concrete’, the author creates a tension within each of these transformative moments between the perceived role of the journalist as public intellectual and the myriad bottlenecks – direct and indirect – that have prevented it at every step from achieving its ideal. In this way, each transformative moment becomes a dialectic between the ideal and brutal reality, between theory and practice, between what the public expects

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and what they get. This makes the book an interesting read – perhaps even an important one, if you can get beyond the author’s more controversial claims. For instance, whilst many may agree that ‘the more powerful press of the second half of the twentieth century did an inadequate job of keeping the powerful in check’, it might be harder to accept that this was ‘arguably because it tried too hard to be professional’. Nevertheless, even if you do not always agree, this dialectical structure and the depth and breadth of material covered are interesting and thought-provoking. This might be because Nerone himself is acutely aware of the danger of analysing history from the perspective of where we are today. As he acknowledges, ‘histories aren’t about the past, but about the relationship between the past and present’.

Even still, could it really be true that the idea of the journalist as public intellectual is nothing more than ‘a fantasy’ that ‘every democratic revolution since the eighteenth century has embraced’ to some extent? Did the ‘pull of professionalism’ and the notion of objectivity as a professional ideology in the early twentieth century really ‘allow journalists to better represent the public’, he asks, or:

*...did it function as a useful ideal, giving journalists something to strive for, something they could not, perhaps, attain, but could approach, and in the striving make the world a better place? Or did it simply mystify the way power was distributed by making people think that they were represented, when in fact they were only spectators?*

Is it fair to present the entire history of journalism as a regulative fiction that the profession itself perpetuates or does this fail to acknowledge the role of the professional journalist throughout history in ‘keeping the powerful in check’? Whatever your view, the latter is clearly not the book an Emeritus Professor ‘dissatisfied with the tools his generation of teachers and scholars of the media system left them 30 years ago’ set out to write. In detailing the various bottlenecks that have prevented journalism from reaching its ideal, the real objective is to draw a line under media-centric views that dominate today’s understandings of

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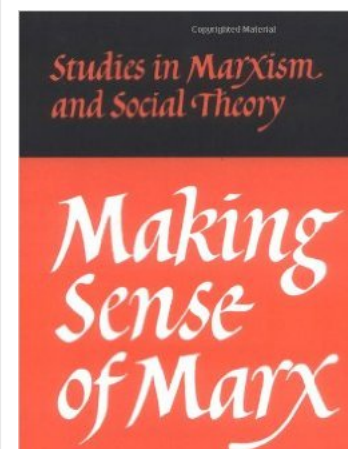
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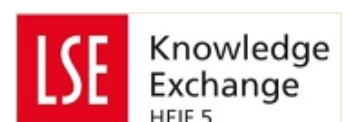
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news media and journalism in order to make room for new ways of thinking. After the late-twentieth-century press ‘made it easy for the Nixons and Thatchers of the world to slap it around’, Nerone writes, today’s ‘disarray should be refreshing, even hopeful’. Just because it hasn’t been successful doesn’t mean it won’t ever be.

Where exactly might this hope for a public intelligence be found? As the author suggests, it might just come from selectively sifting through the past to come to a broader understanding of media and journalism. Although obvious to those thinking that way all along, therein lies the relevance of the book to readers outside the US in that it can be seen as representing a bridge between how media is taught and understood in the US and how it is taught and understood elsewhere in the developed world. So even if the book makes generalisations that do not always apply – such as assumptions about a binary between state-owned or private/corporate-owned that does not always apply elsewhere, e.g. the BBC, the *Guardian* and the *Observer* – all bets are off when the author sees ‘intimations of what a happy ending would look like’ in Walter Benjamin’s angel of the future. By mentioning Benjamin in the conclusion of a self-confessed ‘parochial book with a guilty conscience’, the author casts interesting new light on the critical theorists that pepper the text directly and indirectly throughout, including Jürgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as well as Nerone’s critical engagement with Friedrich Nietzsche, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Lippman and Eric Hobsbawm. ‘Let a thousand dissertations bloom!’ the author exclaims hopefully, as he encourages the next generation to sift through the past in search of a broader, perhaps more universal, understanding of media theory ‘shot through with chips of messianic time’.

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**Elizabeth Folan O’Connor**, PhD, MSc, BA, is an assistant lecturer in the School of Applied Social Studies at University College Cork, Ireland. [Read more reviews by Elizabeth Folan O’Connor.](#)

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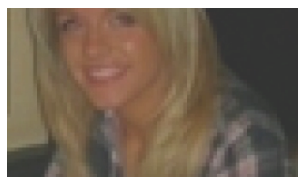
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3