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Review of Mari, The American Newsroom: A History, 1920-1960

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Mari, Will. *The American Newsroom: A History, 1920-1960*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2021. 368 pp. \$28.00 (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-826-22296-1.

Reviewed by Melissa Greene-Blye (University of Kansas)

Relying on a variety of primary source documents, most notably trade publications, memoirs, and textbooks, Will Mari tells readers, "this study focuses on the daily, experiential nature of journalistic work," with the goal of telling the story of a typical news worker in a typical newsroom during the decades between 1920 and 1960 (p. 4). But more than just a re-telling of autobiographical derring-do, or a day-in-the-life narrative, Mari examines how the space in which these workers labored informed how they viewed themselves and their work in the larger context of American journalism. Examining the newsroom as a metaphorical, relational space, Mari seeks to understand how the newsroom created a unique culture as those within its walls interacted with one another as well as with those outside of what would become a community defined by occupation. Describing the newsroom as a "metaphorical space," but not an "imagined or perceived space," the author asks about the very nature of the newsroom: is it "part of a collective space for news workers, a flexible metaphor, or vehicle for the social life of journalism?" (p. 5). Mari argues it is all three and goes on to indicate that this work is an attempt "to provide a history of this relational construct, or concept" (p. 5).

Although Mari acknowledges the ways in which tangible structural details inform newsroom work and relationships, he emphasizes that is not the purpose of this study, rather the emphasis is on the ways in which newsroom organization, structure and hierarchy created power dynamics that became an integral part of the work of journalism and, ultimately, the culture of what emerged as a vocational community. This, too, the author states is a central theme of the book: the ways in which reporters formed a unique newsroom culture, with the newsroom serving as the principal site for socialization into the community.

But the work does not focus solely on the experience of reporters. One of its strengths is that it strives to include all the positions up and down the newsroom hierarchy as reflected by full chapters dedicated to copy boys and girls and photographers, rewrite staff and copyeditors, as well as those who act as junior and senior peers to reporters based on their time in the newsroom and the type of content they delivered. The author also importantly acknowledges how geography informed the development of this professional community and, more broadly, much of journalism history, discussing how larger municipalities, particularly New York City, where many legacy media were (and still are) based, often overshadowed the experience of news workers in smaller regional and local newsrooms nationwide. Mari addresses this geographic bias in an initial note on sources at the beginning of the book. This section is well-done and provides a detailed

and thorough accounting of source selection and explanation for efforts to fill any perceived gaps in the historical record, including a good discussion of the way memoirs and other personal and institutional archival materials were used to supplement, reinforce, or counter those obtained from trade publications and textbooks. By offering such a thorough accounting, the author makes clear the materials used to undergird the arguments and observations made in the remainder of the book.

The detailed note on sourcing also allows the author to put forward a clear and convincing explanation of the methodology used in course of the study and its reliance on employing elements of an ethnographic approach, including thick description to create a “social history applied to media history” (p. xvii). It is this approach, with its use of theory, “to inform, but not drive, an inductive interpretation of historical evidence” that readers will find contributes to what makes this book an important intervention in the field (p. xvii). As Mari notes, “Theory here helps the historian understand the processes and power differentials at work in newsrooms” (p. 5). Mari argues that American newsroom culture is an integral part of American journalism history, and it is in this vein that he ties together the multi-faceted central points outlined above to offer the central argument and contribution of the volume and bring the past to bear on the present. He notes that even as newsrooms change, shift, shrink, or disappear, the newsroom culture and vocational community created during the period from 1920 to 1960 laid the foundation for the way news work was done and journalism was practiced for the remainder of the twentieth century, and arguably into the current moment.

If there was one area that would be worthy of more attention, it would be the way those power dynamics served to exclude some individuals from the newsroom culture and community that is being examined. However, the author acknowledges in the introduction that newsrooms were not open doors for women or persons of color with some notable exceptions during the timeframe of this study.

Mari ambitiously takes on a period of rapid growth and change in the news business, the period of this study saw dynamic changes in technology, ownership and labor relations, and professionalization. But his goal is also to offer insight into the ways individual newsroom workers experienced these changes and how that informed their sense of self as part of the larger journalistic community. This heavy lift in part explains perhaps the lengthy introduction to this volume, but by investing the time to outline what this work seeks to do (and not do), the author sets the reader up to enjoy the remaining chapters as intended, with the bonus of the inclusion of cartoons offering insight into the newsroom culture under examination.

This book is a worthwhile read for scholars and those seeking to understand the evolution of news work and the way in which the space of that work informed the development of journalism as we know it today. Those who have labored in a newsroom will have a special appreciation for this examination of newsroom culture and the

evolution of community within a single newsroom and, more broadly, among the larger field of journalistic endeavor.