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BOOK REVIEW:

Martin Conboy, *Journalism, Technology and Cultural Practice: A History*, London: Routledge, 2023; 205pp. ISBN: 9781138299757, A\$69.99.

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In this engaging exploration of the complex ways in which the story of journalism is interwoven with social and technological evolution, Martin Conboy offers an elegant response to the challenge of writing a history that captures both change and continuity without distorting either. Drawing extensively on classic and contemporary sources as well as historical materials, he offers fresh ways of thinking about stories we thought we knew and the people those stories bring to life.

Throughout this eminently readable book, Conboy shows us human agency at work in shaping journalism as it adapts to emerging technologies and to the commercial pressures generated by each successive innovation. He deftly demonstrates how journalism has always involved a dialogue between democratic ideals and economic imperatives, as well as a deliberate construction of audiences as consumers, citizens, and contributors.

Although the book encompasses media institutions and practitioners around the Western world, Conboy's focus is primarily on journalism in the United Kingdom. For instance, he provides an excellent depiction of how technological developments, and the journalism that responded to and applied them, were inextricably linked to the growth of the British Empire in the 19th century. In considering the rise of broadcast, he sets the United States as a counterpoint to the UK, showing how the two nations' cultural and political contexts shaped a commercial radio and television environment in the former in contrast to a more prominent "public service" model in the latter. More recently, the war between Rupert Murdoch and the trade unions, which drained the ink from London's Fleet Street, is a lesson in how human willpower can mould the effects of technological, economic, and social forces.

I found the consideration of our own digital age especially engrossing. The last two chapters raise existential questions for journalists and those of us who cling to belief in its potential and hope for its future. Previous technologies can be viewed as part of a continuum, one that has required ongoing and sometimes difficult changes in process but have not fundamentally threatened either journalists' normative rationales or publishers' commercial ones. The history of journalism that Conboy shows us throughout his book has largely been one of accretion of and accommodation to change. Are digital technologies part of this continuum or are they unique, a break point in the trajectory of media history from the 16th century to the 20th? Can journalism remain a sustainable enterprise in the face of the radical reshaping of audience choices, capabilities, and consumption patterns? Just how significant are the scale and scope of contemporary change – and will we still recognise as journalism what comes next?

Journalists, Conboy concludes, must demonstrate that what they offer is superior to the alternatives. But he does not seem particularly optimistic. The rupture to the economic underpinnings of the media is severe, and the response so far has neither broadened nor deepened the public service function of journalism, which instead continues to be decimated

by an ongoing erosion of fiscal resources. To these concerns we might add the crisis in public trust of the media, the rise in news avoidance, and the increasing reliance on social media as primary information sources. The startlingly rapid evolution, in the period since this book went to press, in the capabilities of artificial intelligence to convincingly mimic journalistic accounts is also worrying.

But these fears for the future do not detract from the very significant value of Conboy's book. *Journalism, Technology and Cultural Practice* is exceptionally well-documented and beautifully written, serving up nuggets of insight on virtually every page. The author's evident love of his subject, and his wide-ranging knowledge of journalism's deep roots, make this book an enlightening joy to read.

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