

“A Dozen Overrated?”

Twelve books not as good as their reputations

By W. Joseph Campbell

I was wrapping up a manuscript on a book about media-driven myths—stories about and by the news media that are widely believed but which, on close inspection prove apocryphal—when Jim Martin asked if I would contribute “a dozen best” selection to *American Journalism*.

I would love to, I told Jim. But would he be interested in something a little more edgy and slightly provocative? Say, a list of the dozen most-overrated books in journalism history? I had been frustrated by the lapses and errors of fact that I had encountered during the months of research into media-driven myths. Overrated books had been much on my mind.

Jim liked the idea and even began musing about the titles that might make such a list. The upshot of our conversation follows.

Criteria for choosing “a dozen overrated” books in journalism history are admittedly impressionistic. The selections stem largely from books that I’ve scrutinized in research projects over the years. To be “overrated” is not necessarily to be a bad book. Some titles on this roster are engaging and nicely written. Most are popular works and many of them are well-known. But none really is as good as its reputation. In some important way, all twelve titles are flawed, either in interpretation, analysis, or in representation of historical events. And many of the “overrated” books have given rise to, or helped solidify, media-driven myths.

The titles appear in order of their “overrated” status. None of

them is the work of friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. There are no scores are being settled here.

Halberstam, David. *The Powers That Be*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1979.

This powerful, sweeping, epic study offers the thesis that mass media emerged as politically powerful entities during the twentieth century. *The Powers That Be* is riveting. But it's lousy history. I hate to speak poorly of Halberstam's work (he died last year in an automobile accident), but *The Powers That Be* is prone to error and exaggeration. It repeated or was the source of a number of media-driven myths, including the notion that Walter Cronkite's special report on Vietnam in February 1968 prompted President Lyndon Johnson to alter his war policy. The broadcast was, Halberstam wrote, "the first time in American history a war had been declared over by an anchorman." Nonsense. The U.S. kept combat troops in Vietnam for five years after the Cronkite program.

Bernstein, Carl, and Bob Woodward. *All the President's Men*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974.

There is no better-written book on this list. *All the President's Men* was a best-seller when it appeared in June 1974, just weeks before the Watergate scandal reached its *dénouement* with President Richard Nixon's resignation. The authors' sharp focus on themselves, and how they covered the unfolding scandal for the *Washington Post*, helped establish the tenacious media myth that the news media brought down Nixon. *All the President's Men* was written with the cinema in mind and the film adaptation in 1976 was a smash hit (even though *Rocky* did win the Oscar that year). The cinematic version solidified the notion that uncovering Watergate was all due to Woodward and Bernstein.

Cantril, Hadley. *The Invasion From Mars*. New York: Harper Torchbook, 1966, reprint of 1940 ed.

Cantril's study of popular reaction to the 1938 radio dramatization of *The War of the Worlds* is recognized as a classic in mass communication research. It also reinforced the erroneous but widely held notion that *The War of the Worlds* broadcast had convulsed America in mass panic and hysteria. Cantril claimed in *Invasion From Mars*

that “people all over the United States were praying, crying, fleeing frantically to escape death from Martians” long before the radio program ended. But data he presented signaled another interpretation: Of the estimated six million or so people who listened to the broadcast, Cantril figured that 1.2 million were “frightened” or “disturbed” or “excited” by what they had heard. That means that most listeners, overwhelmingly, were *not* panicked. And Cantril never operationalized or fully explained what he meant by “frightened” or “disturbed” or “excited.” He couldn’t have meant “panicked.”

W.A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst*. New York: Scribner’s, 1961.

For far too long, *Citizen Hearst* was considered the best biography on the media tycoon. That serious shortcoming was corrected in 2000 with David Nasaw’s *The Chief*, an admirably even-handed treatment of Hearst. Swanberg’s biography, while entertaining in places, characterized Hearst as far more toxic and villainous than he really was. Swanberg’s descriptions of Hearst’s newspapers in the late nineteenth century (“They were printed entertainment and excitement—the equivalent in newsprint of bombs exploding, bands blaring, firecrackers popping....”) were so superficial that I wonder whether he bothered to read them at all. *Citizen Hearst* also promoted the myth that Hearst, in an exchange of telegrams with the artist Frederic Remington, vowed to “furnish the war” with Spain.

Bagdikian, Ben. *The Media Monopoly*, 3rd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.

It may be a surprise to see Bagdikian’s famous work included here. But it qualifies as “overrated” for at least a couple of reasons. Bagdikian’s command of American journalism history was strikingly uneven and unreliable. He claimed, for example, that Hearst pushed the United States into war with Spain, which of course is mediacentric claptrap. Moreover, Bagdikian’s hand-wringing claim that American media were “rapidly moving in the direction of tight control by a handful of huge multinational corporations” always seemed too ominous and too far-fetched to me. And that was before the rise of the digital age, the fracturing of mass media, and the decline of most media conglomerates.

Wisn, Joseph E. *The Cuban Crisis as Reflected in the New York Press (1895–1898)*. New York: Octagon Books, 1965, reprint of 1934 ed.

Wisn's study exerted a significant but not entirely wholesome influence on the scholarship of the press and the Spanish-American War. Wisn argued that the reporting in New York City newspapers created conditions that led the American public to clamor for war with Spain, an outcry the administration of President William McKinley could not resist. Wisn reserved special criticism for the newspapers of Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, saying the "most widely circulated ... newspapers were the least honestly objective in the reporting of news and in the presentation of editorial opinion." Curiously, though, Wisn's evidence points to an alternate and more accurate explanation—it was a failure of diplomacy, not the overheated reporting of some New York dailies, that precipitated the Spanish-American War. In addition, Wisn's book helped resurrect the anecdote about Hearst's vow to "furnish the war."

Kovach, Bill, and Tom Rosenstiel. *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media*. New York: Century Foundation, 1999.

This thin, preachy, woe-is-journalism book was written in the immediate aftermath of the sex-and-lies scandal that led to President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial in early 1999. *Warp Speed* agonized about what it called alarming trends in journalism that the Clinton scandal supposedly had laid bare ("argument is overwhelming reporting," "sources are gaining power over journalists," "there are no more gatekeepers"). But *Warp Speed* offered little historical context for its critique, beyond a tip of the hat to Adolph Ochs for rescuing the *New York Times*. Largely unaddressed were questions such as: Haven't such tensions always been apparent in American journalism? Was there ever a time when American journalism was *not* messy and conflicted? Was there ever a golden age in American journalism? I don't think so.

Churchill, Allen. *Park Row*. New York: Rinehart, 1958.

American journalism may never have had a golden age, but it certainly has had lusty good times. Churchill, who was a prolific social historian, presents a nostalgic look back at the high jinks of journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when

Park Row in lower Manhattan was the nerve center of the American press. It was then America's rollicking Fleet Street. *Park Row* considers among other topics the Hearst-Pulitzer rivalry that took shape in 1895, and the book certainly is entertaining as it skips from anecdote to anecdote. But *Park Row* is largely unsourced and it's hard to tell what's on target and what's exaggerated. The Remington-Hearst anecdote makes an appearance, and that's apocryphal. This is a risky resource for scholars.

Knightly, Phillip. *The First Casualty: From Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.

Knightly's book claims there *was* a golden age for war reporters—from the end of the American Civil War to the start of World War I. In those days, Knightly claims, journalists covered war as if it were “a thrilling adventure story.” But that's such a cliché. *First Casualty* is a credulous work, heavy on anecdote and dotted with inaccuracy and embellishment. It too readily accepts at face value the first-person accounts of war correspondents like James Creelman, who were hyperbole-prone. *First Casualty* recounts Hearst's vow to “furnish the war” and introduces the anecdote by saying: “even if it is apocryphal, [it] illustrates Hearst's determination to get America into the war” with Spain. Well, no, it doesn't.

Downie, Leonard Jr., and Robert G. Kaiser. *The News about the News: American Journalism in Peril.* New York: Knopf, 2002.

This unrelievedly smug assessment by two prominent editors at the *Washington Post* is another in the woe-is-journalism genre. It offers a familiar lament, but it has a twist: the authors' newspaper almost always comes off as a shining example of what's right with American journalism. One inspired and snarky reviewer said *News About the News* would have been better titled *Why Aren't You As Good As We Are?* The book offered, the reviewer said, “all the insight and charm of watching Richie Rich deliver a lecture about self-reliance to a roomful of crack orphans.” A book that haughtily almost begs for mention on an “overrated” books list.

Milton, Joyce. *The Yellow Kids: Foreign Correspondents in the Heyday of Yellow Journalism.* New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

Milton offers an entertaining account of journalists in the yellow press period, starring Harry Scovel, the irrepressible, self-promoting correspondent of the *New York World*. Scovel's meteoric rise and sudden fall (he ruined his career by taking a swing at a U.S. Army general) had been largely lost to journalism history until Milton's book. For all its heartiness, though, *Yellow Kids* is punctuated by exaggeration and improbable speculation—such as the “plausible possibility” that Teddy Roosevelt, in order to bring on the war with Spain, orchestrated a cover-up of the accidental origins of the destruction of the *USS Maine* in Havana harbor in February 1898. Sure, he did.

Thomas, Helen. *Watchdogs of Democracy? The Waning Washington Press Corps and How It Has Failed the Public.* New York: Scribner/Lisa Drew, 2006.

The title of Thomas' book promises far more than its disjointed and repetitive content delivers. *Watchdogs of Democracy?* is included here mostly because of the reputation Thomas cultivated in forty years as a cranky and challenging White House reporter for UPI. In *Watchdogs of Democracy?* Thomas indulges in the golden age fallacy, offering Valentines to American journalists of old. Seymour Hersh is one of her all-time favorites. “Lest I appear to gush, well, so be it,” she writes. Thomas also pushes the argument that the American news media were comatose in the run-up to the Iraq War. While that view has hardened into conventional wisdom, there is ample evidence to suggest that it's not quite so solid. But don't turn to *Watchdogs of Democracy?* for searching analysis.

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That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms (2006). He also has written *The Emergent Independent Press in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire: From Voice of State to Advocate of Democracy* (1998), *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (2001), and *The Spanish-American War: American Wars and the Media in Primary Documents* (2005).