Well-known media sociologist Jeremy Tunstall has compiled an interesting and wide-ranging reader that addresses the subject of media occupations and professions across a variety of time periods (dating as far back as the mid-19th century) and across a variety of national contexts (though with an emphasis on the U.S. and Great Britain). The collection brings together 21 excerpts from previously published work, as well nine original contributions. The book’s selections address both the journalistic and the entertainment components of the media industries; however, the selections are a bit more heavily weighted toward the former. This is of course not surprising given the much greater focus that researchers have devoted to journalists, editors and publishers over the years, as opposed to actors, directors, and scriptwriters. Given the increasing extent to which individual media organizations produce both news and entertainment content, and the increasing blurriness of the line between news and entertainment content, Tunstall’s organizational scheme seems quite appropriate.

The book is divided into five sections. The first section, titled “Origins,” contains a selection of readings that provide an historical perspective on media occupations and professions. These selections (which include an excerpt from Leo Rosten’s 1937 book on Washington correspondents and an excerpt from Max Weber on political journalists) are particularly interesting in terms of the historical perspective they provide on contemporary issues. For instance, Rosten at one point notes the pressures that the daily news cycle placed on Washington correspondents. The decision-making challenges that this “tyranny of the immediate” (as Rosten calls it) placed on journalists in the 1930s have, of course, only been compounded by the immediacy of newer media technologies such as television and the Internet. Certainly, the tyranny of the immediate is much more oppressive today than it was in the 1930s, and journalism may be suffering as a result.

The book’s second section, titled “Moguls and Barons,” presents selections that focus on the characteristics, backgrounds, and behaviors of high-profile media owners. This section begins, appropriately enough, with an excerpt from Tunstall and Michael Palmer’s 1991 book, Media Moguls in which the authors define media moguls as those who own and operate major media companies in an entrepreneurial, eccentric, and risk-taking style. This section also contains interesting pieces on German media mogul Alfred Hugenberg, who assisted Hitler with his rise to power and on the power structure of the Soviet Union’s broadcasting system.

The third section, titled “Stars,” contains pieces on the motion picture star systems in the United States and India, as well as pieces on the rise of talk radio stars in the U.S. and the behaviors of entrepreneurial newspaper editors in England. Particularly illuminating is a 1941 piece (again by Leo Rosten) on Hollywood stars and actors that provides a sobering reminder that the outrageous salaries that today’s stars receive are far from a recent phenomenon. American silent film star Mary Pickford, for in-
stance, was earning as much as 1.2 million per movie in the early 1920s, and many early motion picture stars (such as Shirley Temple) were able to earn up to 15 times their salaries through product endorsements and licensing agreements.

Section four (the most extensive section in the book) is titled “Professionalizing Media Occupations.” The selections included in this section address issues such as the rise of labor unions; the changing educational prerequisites for entering media professions; the role of family and personal connections in professional entry and advancement; and the changing occupational requirements for some media professions. On this latter subject, Tunstall includes an interesting excerpt from Joe Foote’s 1998 book on the changing role of correspondents in television news. In this excerpt, Foote characterizes broadcast networks’ increasing reliance on anchors over correspondents as shifting “the center of gravity from news gathering to news processing,” a transition that not only marginalizes news correspondents but that also can affect the thoroughness and accuracy of news coverage. Many of the pieces in this section also deal with journalism’s long struggle for professional status and the surprisingly low esteem in which the journalistic profession has been held throughout most of its history. As many of the selections in the book illustrate, it is only relatively recently in the history of journalism that the select few journalists at the highest tiers of the profession have achieved enormous prestige, financial compensation, and influence.

The book’s final section, titled “National and Regional Overviews of Media Occupations,” contains overviews of media industry structure, history, and occupations focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, China, Australia, France, the former Soviet Union, and Germany. Unlike the other sections of the book, all of the selections in this section are original contributions. As such, they are more fully developed and self-contained than many of the other selections, which are primarily excerpts from previously published books, and as such occasionally come across as somewhat disjointed and lacking in analytical context (particularly since some of the excerpts are quite short).

As this overview of the book’s subject matter suggests, a common theme of many of the selections is the dramatic hierarchies that exist in media occupations, with those at the top of the pay scale of a given occupation in many cases earning exponentially more than those at the bottom of the pay scale. The most obvious examples are the pay disparities between a national network news anchor and a small-market news anchor, or those between an A-list Hollywood actor and an extra. However, the book does an excellent job of illustrating that these hierarchies encompass a variety of factors, including gender (i.e., pay differentials between men and women), geography (i.e., large market versus small market), and technology (broadcast versus print, television versus motion pictures, radio versus television).

As this overview also suggests, much of the value of the book arises from its historical detail. Indeed, most of the selections focus much more intently on descriptive detail than on analysis. In this regard, the selections chronicle a variety of interesting phenomena, including the rise of talk radio stars, the emergence of New York as the media capital of the United States (and perhaps the world), and the development of the “star” system in print and broadcast news. The book also provides a useful introduction to the variety of methodological approaches that can be taken in the study of media occupations and professionals. Tunstall’s selections are drawn from projects with a wide range of methodological approaches, including surveys, interviews, content analyses, case studies, and field studies. As a chronicle of the past and present of media occupations and professions around the world – and of the various means of studying them – Tunstall’s collection is a useful resource for academics, professionals, and students.

Rating

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Rating Points: excellent: ++++, poor: +

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