

Barbie Zelizer (Ed.), **Explorations in Communication and History**, New York: Routledge, 2008, 240 pp., \$150 (hardcover), \$39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

David W. Park

Lake Forest College

In a 2006 essay, John Nerone reflected on the place of history in the field of communication. He found a kind of asymmetry at work "between professional historians and communication scholars" (p. 255). As Nerone saw it, historians

don't think much of communication scholarship or the history that communication scholars produce, though they are glad sometimes to borrow a concept or two. Communication scholars, on the other hand, frequently adopt historians, like Elizabeth Eisenstein or Robert Darnton, drafting them into discourses that they didn't intend to participate in. To achieve identity as a field, communication history will need to overcome this asymmetry. (p. 255)



Nerone's notion of an asymmetry no doubt continues to resonate with those in communication who ask questions relating to history.

Barbie Zelizer's recent edited volume titled *Explorations in Communication and History* is an attempt to consolidate some of the best of the historical work by communication scholars; this undertaking lines up nicely with Nerone's call to address the asymmetry that characterizes the relationship between communication and history. In her introduction, Zelizer identifies disciplinary obstacles to mutual understanding between historians and communication history scholars. Because both "the past and communicative exchange" — the domains of the two fields — "go far beyond the specific disciplinary boundaries that house them," their "originary concepts leak outward and in so doing herald the blending of the disciplines that follow in their stead" (p. 5). For both history and communication, Zelizer tell us, "the other is part of the landscape of inquiry, but unevenly so" (p. 5). In this manner, Zelizer frames the volume (appropriately) as an interdisciplinary project, intended to improve upon the short-sightedness of both communication and history. Here one might note that the asymmetry Nerone mentioned in 2006 has been replaced with a kind of equivalence. In a leveling move, Zelizer equates communication and history by pointing out that both approaches have their respective blind spots.

The volume is organized into four sections. These sections address communication as history, audiences, technology, and journalism. Each of these sections gets its own carefully written introduction (by, respectively, Josh Lauer, Jennifer Ruth Horner, Deborah Lubken, and Nicole Maurantonio), and this division into themed sections functions well in the volume, providing substantial cohesion in what could easily have been a sloppy amalgam.

The section on communication as history threatens to be the most ill-defined section of the book, charged as it is with at least addressing the conceptual leakage Zelizer describes in her introduction. Thankfully, the authors in this section are up to the task of showing us what communication and history have to do with each other, and where the two have gone wrong. The first chapter in this section — John Durham Peters' "History as a Communication Problem" — finds Peters taking the asymmetry between history and communication and doing the seemingly impossible: twirling the immense inertial mass of history around the putatively lightweight world of communication. Peters asserts that historical inquiry is, perforce, communication inquiry. Owing to its reliance on recorded information, and thus to media of communication, history can be seen as a practice definitively tied up with issues relating to media storage and to hermeneutics. Peters quips, "The medium is the message in history too" (p. 21). The chapter is an instant classic, one that may play to the communication crowd, with its inversion of the symmetry Nerone has identified. Peters is a tough act to follow, but Paul Starr offers a well-developed sense of what he calls the "historiographic implications of democratic theory" (p. 38). In keeping with his work in *The Creation of the Media* (2004), Starr reviews three theories of democracy, which he refers to as the "minimalist" (p. 34), the "radical" (p. 37), and the "deliberative" (p. 37) approaches. Having established these approaches, he then traces the implications of each to the practice of communication history, emphasizing the historiographical. Starr then closes with his argument that "in the interpretation of democracy that I favor, the development of the mass commercial media has had a mixed, though on the whole positive, character" (p. 41). Starr's tone is polemic, if also quite familiar, as he draws extensively from *The Creation of the Media*.

Starr's chapter is followed by James Curran's "Communication and History," which begins with the blunt and difficult-to-refute argument that the "biggest single change in communications research during the last 20 years is that it has become more international" (p. 46). The problem, as Curran sees it, is that, while many approaches to communications research have capitalized on this expansion of the field, "media history has been little affected by these developments" (p. 47). He notes that, while "the overwhelming majority of media historians — with rare exceptions — are implicated in perpetuating the nation-bound nature of media history" (p. 48), at the same time, "national media histories tend to be subdivided into medium histories: newspaper history, magazine history, film history, radio history, television history and book history (and various offshoots such as library history)" (p. 48). From here, Curran transitions into a critique of the "techno-tradition" (p. 48) in media history, associated with Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. He argues that this familiar techno-tradition in media history "attributes too much influence to technology, too little to society, and fails to engage adequately with their complex interrelationships" (p. 49). "What is needed" if we are to improve our media histories, says Curran, "is a nuanced account which rejects not only technological determinism, but also its polar opposite of social determinism" (p. 54). To decenter our media histories (or at least recenter them), we should "identify major changes that have taken place in extensive parts of the world, and then consider how the media's evolution connected to these changes" (p. 55). His "six nominated mega-trends" are: "1. Nation-building. 2. Development of liberal democracy. 3. Decline of landed elite. 4. Advance of women. 5. Growth of consumer society. 6. Rise of secularism (and resistance to it)" (p. 55). Curran's suggestions fly in the face of ingrained media history approaches, and he makes a powerful case.

The history of the audience presents seemingly insuperable methodological challenges. As Jennifer Ruth Horner's introduction to the "Audiences" section points out, the history of the audience is well advised to "shift from a positivist to a pragmatic approach to evidence," (p. 63) and the authors in this section seem to heed this advice. Susan J. Douglas's concerns are largely historiographical; she examines how textual analysis can be applied to the history of the audience. Douglas argues that "the media historian's hermeneutical responsibility is to seek to make explicit what is implicit, something that viewers rarely do, even in in-depth interviews or focus groups" (p. 73). Because "this can't be done by analyzing one text in isolation . . . we must track and observe the weight of the patterns and repetitions in those texts" (p. 73). Douglas harbors no illusions about the completeness that can be attained from this work. She admits that "textual analysis alone can not tell us all we want to know about past audiences," but insists that "if we follow our caveats, and reclaim the legitimacy of our own hermeneutic talents and duties, we can learn and posit much more than critics of this method might allow" (p. 75). Richard Butsch follows Douglas with a chapter on "three images that usefully distill the ways audiences have been characterized: the bad crowd, the good public, and the weak and isolated individual" (p. 76). Butsch uses examples to crystallize each of these tendencies in thinking about the audience and concludes by demonstrating how "the image of the informed citizen" (p. 85) is reflected in each understanding of the audience. What Butsch does here is show how ideas about the audience play an important role in audience history. S. Elizabeth Bird's "Seeking the Historical Audience" charts "how we might broaden the purview of media and communication history away from text and toward context, in order to enrich our understanding of past audience practices" (p. 92). Bird points to "literary scholars' more recent recovery of the audience (outside the text itself)," and illustrates that "there are sources available that reach into the lived experience of the reader" (p. 100). Here, Bird refers to a shockingly wide range of sources concerning readership, making a strong case that the assumption that sources describing audience members do not exist is simply wrong. The trick is to do the hard work to find commentary on readership and then to know how to use it.

Technology is one of the most enduring themes in media history; it would be hard to imagine a volume such as this without a section dedicated to technology (and, for different reasons, to journalism, which follows). The section of *Explorations in Communication and History* dedicated to technology includes three sharply written chapters, each controversial in its own way. In his chapter, Peter Stallybrass argues that

for all the problems with [Elizabeth] Eisenstein's thesis [in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1980)], its main argument — the revolutionary effects of printing — is even stronger than she originally proposed and that the attempt by recent scholars to argue for the persistence or even the coexistence of manuscript and print is misconceived, depending upon an elision of printing with the printing of books. (p. 111)

Somewhat briefly (his chapter runs only eight pages), Stallybrass shows us how "more and more writing is a direct response to the stimulus of print" (p. 115). He discusses the cases of printed indulgence forms issued by the church, blank pages in almanacs, and the U.S. Constitution and cites them as examples of print and manuscript operating rather upside down from what received history would tell us, based as it is overly much on the history of the book. Anna McCarthy's subsequent chapter deals with public service

television broadcasting, focusing mainly on public service telefilms from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. McCarthy's concerns here are instructive, because "concepts of citizenship change, and so do ideas about what public service media can and should do" (p. 119). McCarthy proposes "a historical approach that sees public service in American commercial television not as a fixed ideal but rather as a flexible discursive relationship between audiences, sponsors and broadcasters" (p. 124). McCarthy's suggestions relate to how one should do history. She is most clear:

Instead of asking of any particular telefilm 'does it or does it not serve a public service, as I define it' the historian should be asking 'how well does it manage to align itself with a public service position, and what organizational, institutional, and cultural processes got it there? To what extent is its status as a public service under contestation, and by whom? On what terms and to what ends?' (p. 125)

This quite plainly requires of the historian more than a "just the facts" approach; "it also involves some kind of exegesis, in which one looks beyond facts for a sense of the underlying assumptions on which particular ideas about representation and persuasion rest" (p. 127).

The aforementioned John Nerone's "Newswork, Technology, and Cultural Form, 1837-1920" begins with discussions of grand narratives in history and of some common narratives in the history of technology. Nerone sidesteps these historiographical concerns to address the titular issue of newswork in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. "In this case," Nerone tells us, "the work environment (the newsroom, the pressroom) is the key media ecology" (p. 140). Nerone backs this up with repeated attempts to entertain technology-centered explanations of the shape of news gathering, only to thwart such narratives with his own well-versed sense of how the work environment matters rather more than almost anything else.

The final section of the book addresses the topic of journalism. David Paul Nord begins the section with a comparison of tendencies in journalism history, media history, and book history. He argues that "these fields might be better understood — and perhaps improved — if we could see why they remain so different" (p. 162). What follows is a carefully written and insightful description of how journalism history and book history find themselves in different positions (each perhaps strangely independent of the other) because "the new book history is largely a reaction against the decontextualized study of *texts*, while the new journalism history is a reaction against the decontextualized study of *institutions*" (p. 163). Nord substantiates this with a careful consideration of contemporary examples of work in the fields of journalism history and book history. Nord calls attention to the tacit assumptions guiding each subfield and notes the shortcomings and strengths that stem from these assumptions.

The most direct consideration of the place of history in the study of communication to be found in this volume comes from Michael Schudson, who identifies some of the very large questions in communication history that, in his opinion, have yet to be given the scholarly attention they need. Beginning with a discussion of Robert Darnton's work, Schudson argues that "the leading historical tales we tell about the news media concern the relationship of journalism and democracy" (p. 183). And, for Schudson, many of the important questions relating to this have yet to be answered, meaning there is much more work to be done. As Schudson puts it:

If only history departments showed the slightest interest in recognizing journalism as an institution of some importance, worth more than casual and superficial asides, we would have more to work with. But I see no forces among historians likely to change this; serious history of journalism is going to have to come from schools of communication and schools of journalism where news as a human activity linked to democracy and the quality of public life is taken seriously. (p. 188)

So, with lots of unanswered (and important) questions before us, we have little to rely on but the resources of our own field to provide some answers. There are encouraging signs that some journalism historians have begun to address the crucial questions relating to the public, democracy, and journalism, but "we have scarcely begun" (p. 188). And if you think the historians are going to help us out on this, Schudson offers little reason for hope. It is a huge job, and like it or not, it is ours.

Robert W. McChesney's "How to Think About Journalism" is probably the least explicitly historical chapter in the entire volume. McChesney spends less time than most of the other authors here working over themes in historical method or hermeneutics. Still, the issues he wrestles with here — in particular, the current "crisis of journalism" (p. 191) — are put carefully into historical context. The chapter reads as one example of what one might *do* with all this history. McChesney's sense of urgency here is notable (as it is in many of his recent books). He begins by identifying the current crisis in journalism, with decreasing readership, newspapers going under, and massive changes in the content of what we currently call journalism. He then outlines the political economy approach to this problem — this is the guts of the titular "How to Think About Journalism" — and applies this to contemporary debates in media policy today, including the Net Neutrality debate and antitrust and communication laws. McChesney closes on two points. The first is that, just as "democracy requires journalism," it could also be said that "journalism needs democracy" (p. 212). Thus journalism "requires a society committed to openness, the rule of law and justice to prosper" (p. 212). The second point is that the "battle to reform media and to establish the basis for the journalism a free society requires cannot be fought in isolation" (p. 212). For this reason, the battle for media reform must take its place amongst other democratic political movements in the U.S.

As should be clear by now, *Explorations in Communication and History* is a sweeping text, with diverse approaches to history. This diversity is to be expected, given the strange place of historical work in communication. Despite this diversity, there are numerous common themes threaded throughout the chapters. One issue that stands out is the need for media historians to decenter their objects of inquiry. We are repeatedly enjoined not to allow ourselves to replicate the model of doing media history that involves taking one type of communication technology, in one nation, at one point in time, and expecting to build this into a broader or more meaningful narrative. Instead, the history of communication — it is worth noting that the term "media history" is not in the title of the book or used very frequently here — will require broader views of the communication process, incorporating some sense of audiences, of internationalization/globalization, and of cultural context.

Another repeated theme here is the consideration that the field of communication has in the institutional place of history. Implicitly or explicitly, it is acknowledged in many of these chapters that

historical work has often been marginal in the field of communication. This volume provides strong evidence that this marginality may lend itself to the kind of disciplinary blending that Zelizer describes in her introduction. In a sense, and to echo Nerone (2006) again, the numerous considerable strengths of this volume may have been made possible in part by the blending of history and communication that has been carried out in the margins.

### References

- Nerone, J. (2006). The Future of Communication History. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23 (3), 254-262.
- Starr, P. (2004). *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books.