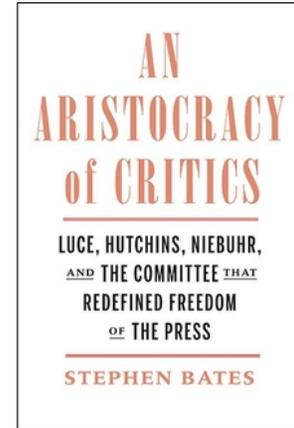


Stephen Bates, **An Aristocracy of Critics: Luce, Hutchins, Niebuhr, and the Committee That Redefined Freedom of the Press**. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020, 312 pp., \$28.00 (hardcover).

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An Aristocracy of Critics: Luce, Hutchins, Niebuhr, and the Committee That Redefined Freedom of the Press is about the genesis and significance of another book, *A Free and Responsible Press* (1947), which was both celebrated and condemned when it was originally published. The *New Republic* lauded it as “one of the most important books in many years” (p. 188). Conversely, I. F. Stone characterized it as “a lot of high-class crap” (p. 188), while *The New Yorker* saluted it with a slight yawn as “an interesting document, but without much wallop” (p. 188). The man who conceived and funded it gave it a “Gentleman’s C’ and no more” (p. 179). However, the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Robert McCormack, was so incensed by it that he commissioned reviewer Frank Hughes to write a 642-page red-baiting exposé of the 138-page report (p. 189).

The most perceptive criticisms of *A Free and Responsible Press* were, however, provided by its contributors. Some disagreed profoundly with parts of the report, and many, perhaps most, probably shared Charles Merriam’s view that no report could capture the richness, “the open-eyed wonder” (p. 6), of the dialogues that produced it. Stephen Bates’ deep and discerning archival immersion reconstructs the backstory of those deliberations, which involved some of the most prominent intellectuals of the time. With historical contextualizing, vivid anecdotes, and telling quotes retrieved from transcripts of the proceedings, he offers some vestigial traces of the “wonder” that Merriam cherished.

Media magnate Henry R. Luce, cofounder of Time Inc., originally conceived of the idea of convening a commission to rethink the philosophy of press freedom in light of the challenges that modern mass communications posed to democracy. He offered to fund the initiative and invited Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, to serve as chair of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press. Convened in 1943, Time Inc. contributed \$200,000 to the commission’s \$215,000 total funding (over \$3 million today). The initiative sponsored 17 meetings, heard 58 witnesses, conducted 225 staff interviews, and assembled 175 documents. The commission’s final report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, concluded that the American press was doing a dreadful job, and warned that if it didn’t improve, the First Amendment would not protect it: “The amendment will be amended” (p. 3).

Luce described the members of the commission as an “aristocracy of critics” (p. 2). In addition to Hutchins, who famously promoted the Great Books movement and inveighed against vocational education, the critics included theologian and political philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr; founder of the American Political Science Association and former Roosevelt advisor Charles Merriam; poet, essayist, and Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish; political communication researcher Harold Lasswell; psychologist, former academic dean,

businessman, and chairmen of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York Beardsley Ruml; cultural anthropologist and ethnographer Robert Redfield; Columbia University economist John M. Clark; leading First Amendment scholar Zechariah Chafee; Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr.; Harvard philosopher William Hocking; former editor of *Commonweal* George Shuster; and University of Pennsylvania law professor and former assistant secretary of commerce and assistant attorney general John Dickinson. Four foreign advisors were also selected to observe the meetings but not sign the report: Jacques Maritain, Kurt Riezler, Hu Shih, and John Grierson. All of the American members of the commission were White Protestant males, academics, or former academics—except for Shuster, who was recruited because he was Catholic, and Schlesinger, who was partially of Jewish ancestry. One woman, Ruth A. Inglis, served on the staff. Luce and Hutchins had agreed to exclude journalists, but Luce was disappointed when he too was excluded, only permitted to participate in drinks and dinners, but not the discussions, which usually took place over two or three days in hotels.

While members were homogeneous, Bates points out that it did not mean that they were ideal candidates for committee work. In his words, "Dickinson was notoriously pompous, Redfield arrogant, Lasswell long-winded, Hutchins imperious" (p. 51). Hutchins identified three meta questions for the members to ponder: "What society do we want? What do we have? How can the press . . . be used to get what we want?" (p. 52). These questions were so meta that after eight meetings and more than a year into their proceedings, Shuster complained, "Our *purpose* has never been defined with adequate care" (p. 154). As a result, multiple interpretations competed. Bates lists some of the issues members actually discussed: "Newsroom bias, distrust of media, foreign and domestic propaganda, corporate domination of political discourse, a fragmenting and polarized electorate, hate speech, and demagoguery, as well as what we now call echo chambers, trolls, deplatforming, and post-truth politics" (p. 1)—issues that signal more than an antiquarian interest in revisiting the 1947 volume.

Bates set two goals for his inquiry. The first goal, as the above epitaphs suggest, was to examine the personal and social ferment that produced the ideas. Quoting a pithy observation from long-winded Lasswell, "Political science without biography is a form of taxidermy" (p. 7), Bates wisely opts for biography, given the larger-than-life figures involved.

The second goal was to identify any lessons that the Commission on the Freedom of the Press may offer for our own troubled times, for example, comparing the threats that news media behemoths posed to democracy in the 1940s to those that social media giants like Facebook and Google pose today. To get here from there, Bates also briefly maps the influences of the commission's report on the founding texts of the academic field of communication in the United States, for example, Siebert, Schramm, and Peterson's (1956) *Four Theories of the Press* and Schramm's (1957) *Responsibility in Mass Communication*. Schramm's solo volume included an Introduction by commission member Niebuhr. The commission's report itself recommended that universities create "academic-professional centers of advanced study, research, and publication in the field of communications," including graduate programs (p. 133).

Understandably, Bates meets greater success in reaching his first objective than his second since our social media, post-truth, fake news problem remains a work in progress. Despite the digital revolution, however, he does note parallels between the dilemmas facing the Hutchins' committee and those confronted by the 2019 Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. The conclusions of the two initiatives seem

to agree on many points, but they differ on a crucial one. Where the Hutchins group followed Louis Brandeis's admonition that the solution to bad speech is more speech, the Knight Commission reversed the equation, suggesting that the remedy for bad speech is less speech. It contends that social media requires curation. Bates succinctly sums up the departure: "The common-carrier model was part of the solution in 1947. Now it's part of the problem" (p. 222).

The prescient Niebuhr foresaw this possibility in 1946. In the paradoxes that he favored, the theologian pointed out that free expression can generate disorder that imperils freedom and asked, "What should be done if freedom accentuates conflict to the point where the fact of freedom cannot be accepted?" (p. 53). Unfortunately, the combined wisdom of the aristocracy of critics found no satisfactory resolution to that Gordian knot of liberal democracy. Bates does, however, do an excellent job of describing this and other quandaries the commission pondered. MacLeish, for example, identified another perennial conundrum that bedevils access to free expression, corporate or market censorship: the fact that owners and managers of the press can censor ideas as effectively as governments. Hocking lamented that the First Amendment only affirms a negative concept of free expression by prohibiting Congress from making any law that abridges freedom of speech or press. He advocated adding a positive concept of liberty, which would enable the free expression of ordinary citizens: a view similar to the position advanced today by Amartya Sen (2009), who argues that rights are meaningless without the capabilities citizens need to exercise them.

This is only a small sample of the "wonders" that can be gleaned from Bates' book, including an unusually rich and extensive cache of substantive footnotes. The prose is engaging and accessible, pitched to the general reader—no prerequisites required—even though it is deeply informed by the relevant legal and scholarly literature. Bates humanizes the aristocrats, doesn't hesitate to chronicle their foibles, even occasionally with a light touch of snark, as for example in referring to "philosopher king Walter Lippmann," a figure who casts a long shadow over the proceedings of the commission even though he was not a member or even apparently a witness (p. 57). An appendix listing the commission's witnesses would be a welcome addition to *An Aristocracy of Critics*. Bates does, however, achieve his objectives. He successfully recovers some of the brilliance of the contentious intellectual ferment that could never be captured in a univocal committee report. In the process, he identifies perennial dilemmas that trouble relations between freedom and responsibility: trouble that is compounded in our time by epistemological and social fracture.

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