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Thomas B. Connery, **Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life,** Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011, 281 pp. $24.95 (paperback).

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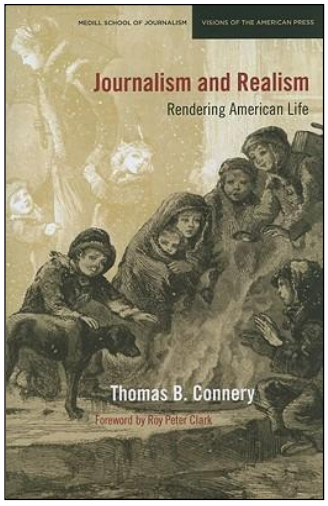

In the early 21st century, social and mobile media technologies are changing how journalists are writing and reporting news. Twitter has challenged some reporters as storytellers to "tweet" breaking news in 140 characters or less. When coupled with a mobile phone, apps such as Vine allow reporters to instantly capture and share short videos—not to simply show what is happening but to give viewers a sense of what French literary theorist Roland Barthes called "being there." The journalism profession is also being tested by independent bloggers who are often credited for covering news in their communities better than those working in legacy media do. The introduction of new storytelling forms is nothing new in the world of journalism, of course. Thomas B. Connery's latest book, ***Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life***, is an excellent reminder that we can learn much from studying cultural practices to better understand how emerging storytelling forms are evolving and changing the media landscape today.

Connery, professor of communication and journalism at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, convincingly lays out how storytelling practices, particularly after the U.S. Civil War era, fundamentally changed. His book documents a cultural shift when journalists, authors, and artists began abandoning Victorian-era conventions in favor of more realistic practices of storytelling. He presents a compelling argument that news reporters and editors, along with artists and other writers, abandoned romantic and idealized communication in favor of a more realistic tone. Noting that any attempt to measure or define the concept of "realism" is problematic, Connery instead argues that we consider this transformation as a broader social and cultural practice that he calls a "paradigm of actuality."

A well-known and influential scholar of literary journalism, Connery extends his influence in this work to theorize how journalists, artists, and other documentarians were ushering in a new social and cultural order that attempted to report and describe the *actual*. "For journalism," Connery explains, "this paradigm of actuality essentially involved documenting, in nonfiction and fiction, in drawings and photographs, the perceived reality" (p. 7). What Connery reveals in his book goes beyond documenting changes in literary circles; he also outlines a significant cultural shift that permeated beyond the world of journalism. Through a number of examples, he notes that the sentimental and idealized words and images that infused journalism and the arts were clearly a distortion of the realities of everyday life. As the post-Civil War century era took shape, a shift from romanticism to idealism was palpable. Connery writes,

> The bottom line is that this paradigm of actuality did indeed reflect a realistic impulse, a realistic sensibility, in that it was based primarily and essentially on the observation of life being lived, and not created in a more abstract fashion from the imagination. (p. 15)

Journalism and Realism is organized in eight chapters, each covering a range of historical moments during the later half of the 19th century. Artifacts under study include not only journalistic writing but also other forms of fiction and nonfiction writing, such as illustrated news, poetry, and art. While the book's primary focus concerns the post-Civil War era, Connery begins with examples from obscure Antebellum American writers to chart the shift from romance to the actual through the end of the century. Through these examples and more, Connery reveals how an ethos of "actuality" emerged in all forms of storytelling, illustrating a cultural shift from idealism to realism, hence his "paradigm of actuality" concept.

Connery states that he is not uncovering new knowledge but rather using existing bodies of research to recast his own investigation through "the scholarship or integration" (p. 9). In this integration, he analyzes the work of well-known writers like Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, as well as the early newspapers writings of Walt Whitman and the social documentary efforts by photographer Jacob Riis. Connery also cites less-known writers in his research, including as George G. Foster, who chronicled city life for Horace Greeley's New York *Tribune* newspaper. A contemporary of Whitman, Foster wrote about his observations—calling them "slices"—in and around the city of New York and also published more than one book of his writings, including *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* in 1850. According to Connery, the work by Foster and others in Antebellum America is "representative of the cultural shift to depict the actual" (p. 70) happening in the press. Quoting Stuart M. Blumin, Connery explains that authors from the period were "explaining the new metropolis to a society that was in so many ways affected by its development" (pp. 69–70). Focusing mostly on expressions of city living—for example, New York City—Connery describes how these journalists, poets, writers, painters, photographers, and lecturers were describing a vastly changing cityscape through the lens of industrialization and immigration. He notes that these reporters and artists were particularly interested in the seedier side of city life, and through their urban sketches, were performing "cultural reporting." He credits these 19th century cultural reports as a forerunner to the development of investigative reporting, literary journalism, and nonfiction writing that we see today in such publications as the *The New Yorker* and others.

Connery also contributes to our understanding of the development of pictorial reporting in the 19th century with examples from the illustrated press and other attempts to report the news through images. He devotes Chapter 5 ("Picturing the Press") to illustrated newspapers and the development of photography in reporting and documentary practices. Echoing other scholarship on the illustrated press, Connery discusses two publications in particular—*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization*—as examples of publications serving the demands for more true-to-life depictions of daily living. In this chapter, Connery reminds us that the "reality" portrayed in illustrated news accounts was questioned by contemporaries and not taken as a direct reflection of reality. He notes that the development of illustrated news intensified during the Civil War period and marked a shift in reporting, as words and images together represented "a distinct reality or version of events" (p. 128).

Connery's fluid writing style makes this book a very enjoyable and useful read. Culturally, we can trace the current state of journalism to these 19th century historical actors, some better known than others, that Connery considers in his work. This book is recommended to those who wish to better understand the culture of journalism during the latter half of the 19th century. It would serve as an excellent text for those who teach journalism history in either an upper-level undergraduate course or graduate course. *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life* is one in a collection of works published in the Visions of the American Press series by the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.