

The Press of Events

ON PRESS. By Tom Wicker. (The Viking Press, New York, 1978.)

AIR TIME. By Gary Paul Gates. (Harper & Row, New York, 1978.)

About two hundred years ago, Voltaire observed that “to pick up the pen is to be at war.” Certainly, that remark, when applied to contemporary journalism (both written and electronic), could be taken as a truism for much of the recent controversy surrounding the role of the “media,” as we call it now in our McLuhanized age.

Since the adoption of the United States Constitution with that First Amendment provision that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press . . .,” there has been controversy over just exactly how much freedom and how much restraint the American press ought to enjoy in the affairs of our society. It is this issue that forms the focus of *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker’s recent book, *On Press*. Wicker, in his somewhat autobiographical analysis of his own media experience, begins with the event that he feels marked the emergence of the press as a major issue in recent American political life. Wicker dates this issue — or at least the public’s perception of it — from the Goldwater Convention of the Republican Party in San Francisco in 1964. Wicker recalls the GOP delegates’ outrage at the press galleries when President Eisenhower, speaking to the convention, criticized the media by referring to “sensation-seeking columnists and commentators.” As Wicker recalls it:

In retrospect, that moment in the Cow Palace seems to me to have marked the emergence of “the press” as an issue in American life and politics. . . . So, far from being “observers” — like sportswriters in the press box at an important football game — reporters, by 1964, were coming to be seen by millions of Americans as players in the game itself.

Wicker goes on to make some interesting distinctions between the traditional manner of objectively reporting such an event as the Eisenhower speech and what would today be called a more “interpretive” style of reporting. He points out that the Eisenhower speech — not the delegates’ reaction to it which seems to him the more important aspect of the event —

was reported the next day in papers all over America. Today, he points out, many of those same papers might lean toward the more interpretive, evaluative kind of story. It is just such revelations that make Wicker's book fascinating both for those who may agree with his view of the news and the way it is reported and for those who, doubtless, will disagree.

Wicker takes his reader through a varied press career with an ease of style that has made his column so readable over the years, even when filled with opinions that might make a rational man shudder. At the end of his book, he lands squarely in the corner of the new-style, interpretive journalism. He is also an advocate — as are most serious journalists — of investigative journalism, the kind of reportorial digging that leads to the uncovering of government corruption, scandals, and, of course, Watergate.

By contrast, Gary Paul Gates' book, *Air Time*, is an elaborately detailed compendium of "inside" information about the history of CBS News, but, unlike Wicker's book (which makes valid as well as controversial points), here the emphasis is more on data and less on evaluation. Gates, who co-authored an earlier book about the Nixon White House, *The Palace Guard*, with newscaster Dan Rather, offers considerable insight into the internal politics of network news gathering, but that too often seems to be the book's primary interest. There is, for this reader, too little discussion of how network news-gathering policies are determined and how they have been carried out. In short, Gates' book lets us see how the men at CBS operate without giving us much about "why" or the effects of that major network's policies. The effect is that we see one of dozens of new prima donnas attempting to outmaneuver one another for the anchorman spotlight. Yet, when read with Wicker's book, Gates' work does shed additional light on the controversial aspects of the media today.

Wicker's book, naturally, is an effective counter volume to the view of Kevin Phillips' *Mediocracy* of a few years back in which that author accused media men of being hostile to middle American traditional values and perceived the new media as essentially a hostile segment in today's society, as a "new elite" that tried to direct, rather than inform, the public. Wicker urges the media to "take an adversary position toward the most powerful institutions of American life":

An adversary press would hold truth — unattainable and

frequently plural as it is — as its highest value, and knowledge as its first responsibility.

That point of view is not new with Wicker. It is held by most serious journalists, of whatever shade of political opinion. Indeed, Joseph Alsop, writing in *A Reporter's Trade* back in the 1950s, stated it clearly and succinctly:

Let the truth be open. Let all of the press have easy access to it, instead of forcing highly specialized reporters to fight to get the truth. Then the truth will always be known and will always be debated by the whole nation. Let the whole nation debate the truth. Then the intending deceivers of the people will find their task too difficult. Let prolonged deception of the people again become too difficult. Then gross errors at the top will again be self-correcting, before they have produced irremediable disasters.

Alsop's statement was made in response to the Administration of Harry S. Truman and its secretiveness about certain matters. But the injunction of that writer — like most good men of the media — best states both the value and the highest aims of a free press.

Jere Real

New Books and Articles in Public Policy

William R. Allen and C. Lowell Harriss

Two Essays on Corporate Philanthropy and Economic Education (International Institute for Economic Research, 1100 Glendon Avenue, Suite 1625, Los Angeles, California, 1978).

Gerhard Anders, W. Philip Gramm and S. Charles Maurice

Does Resource Conservation Pay? (International Institute for Economic Research, Los Angeles, California, 1978). This is the 14th Original Paper in a series.

Robert J. Barro

The Impact of Social Security on Private Saving: Evidence from the U.S. Time Series (American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., 1978). This is the first in a series of studies on the effect of social security on saving and capital formation. For further information contact AEI, 1150 17th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

P. T. Bauer and John O'Sullivan

"Foreign Aid: For What?" (*Commentary*, December 1978).

James Bennett and Manuel Johnson

The Efficacy of Bond-Finance Fiscal Policy (George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, 1978). This study contends that deficit spending by the federal government can lead to lower levels of output, income, and employment rather than economic expansion.

The Energy Crisis in the U.S.: An Economic Perspective (George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, 1978). This study examines recent public policy actions related to energy issues in light of the evidence on the economic scarcity of oil, natural gas and coal.

Richard Bishirjian

The Development of Political Theory: A Critical Analysis (The Society For the Study of Traditional Culture, Dallas, Texas, 1978). A young political philosopher has written a perceptive and important analysis of the ideas on the nature of man and society which govern men.

Ake Blomqvist

A Market View of Health Services (The Fraser Institute, 626 Bute Street, Vancouver, B.C., Canada). This new study for The Fraser Institute examines the role of government in the health care profession.

Karl Brunner (ed.)

The First World & the Third World: Essays on the New Economic Order (Center for Research in Government Policy and Business, Graduate School of Management, University of Rochester, New York, 1978). These essays include contributions by Peter Bauer, Harry G. Johnson, Senator Daniel Moynihan and Rachel McCulloch.