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Essay

Why Journalism History Matters: The Gaffe, the “Stuff,” and the Historical Imagination

By Andie Tucher

It seemed perfect vacation reading, a mystery novel with historical heft. Set in the weeks just after the end of the American Civil War, the rousing tale offered secret codes, desperate chases, epic conflagrations, blistering gunfights, and plots and murders aplenty. But it was published by an important house and clearly aspired to be taken as serious entertainment: it featured characters based on, or at least bearing the names of, real-life people, and in a concluding note the author, whose biographical blurb mentioned graduate studies in both journalism and history, included a long list of the historical works that had informed the novel. So I was ready for some enlightened pleasure.

Until that crucial scene in which a photographer manages to snap a picture of a distant and fleeting transaction in a crowded street at dusk, then *forces an opponent to leave town by threatening to publish the incriminating photograph in the newspapers*.

I don't have to tell readers of *American Journalism* how wildly impossible that scenario is given the technological capacities of both cameras and printing presses in 1865. My point here, however, isn't to embarrass the author, which is why I am mercifully not identifying the book, or even to roll my eyes at the sad state of America's historical knowledge. Having spent some time this summer rereading the rich and thought-provoking *American Journalism* series on “why journalism history matters” and some of the other seminal works of this perennial debate, I have come to think that the novelist's gaffe suggests another perspective on what is important about journalism history as well as journalism historians.

The *American Journalism* series seems to acknowledge that in this fortieth anniversary year of James Carey's founding article in *Journalism History*, we still fear that we don't matter. Despite the hard work by journalism historians over the past decades to measure up to the standards of their colleagues in history departments, argues John Nerone, we have yet to earn “attention from and acceptance by mainstream historians,” and he laments the “asymmetry”

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of the relationship between journalism-school and departmented historians. Both sides are aware of it, he says, “but only one side really cares about it.” Other essays in the series argue eloquently for solving the identity crisis of journalism history through a more robust engagement with theory—building it as well as using it—and a more intimate integration into the history of communication. The specter of doom and irrelevance perennially hangs over our enterprise, the sense that journalism history is too smallbore to be important, that there’s little left to see here, and that our salvation seems to lie in going bigger.¹

I understand, and share, the anxiety over how to *matter*, but my encounter with the historically challenged mystery novelist only reinforced my conviction that what we might call the asymmetrically dismissed form of journalism history only *seems* small. Its simplicity is, in fact, deceptive, rooted in a general overreliance on easy but unexamined assumptions. An alternative to acquiescing in our diminution would be to insist on just how complicated we really are. And a good way to start that task, it seems to me, is—in Martin Conboy’s nice phrase—by “extricat[ing] journalism from broader media history.”²

I am as quick as Conboy to agree that advocating extrication “is not to say that [journalism history] is unrelated to other areas of media, economic, or political practice, or even the technological issues which help frame its content.”³ Exploring the larger areas of communications or media suggested by the authors in the *American Journalism* series and heeding their call to “grapple with” theory—that recurrent and slightly unnerving verb of choice—are unquestionably worthy and valid enterprises, without which an extricated journalism history would make no sense.

But journalism history still needs a room of its own. Theoretical grappling tends to lead toward the abstract and universalizing and away from what is most basic about journalism: it is the way that societies tell acceptable stories about what is important or interesting in real life. And doing journalism history requires the historian to address not just how the journalism worked but also how its audiences judged acceptability and what they understood their journalism to say about their relationship with the world.

That’s certainly not a new idea in our field; it’s firmly embedded in our famously belated turn toward “cultural history,” in the conviction (which I share) that textual analysis can tell us something about what journalism

¹James W. Carey, “The Problem of Journalism History,” *Journalism History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 1–7; John Nerone, “Does Journalism History Matter?,” *American Journalism* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 7–27, 8, 11.

²Martin Conboy, “The Paradoxes of Journalism History,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 30, no. 3 (2010): 411–420, 411.

³Mark Hampton and Martin Conboy, “Journalism History—A Debate,” *Journalism Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 154–171, 166.

meant to past audiences, in the suggestion (with which I agree) that journalism history could take cues from the relatively newer field of print culture or the history of the book. But in the essentialist spirit of the 1910 journalism handbook that solemnly informed its neophyte readers that “stuff” was a “technical newspaper [term]” for reading matter, I am tempted to say that a technical term for our vital task is the “cultivation of the historical imagination”—a task that when applied to journalism is uniquely necessary, uniquely challenging, and a unique contribution that *journalism historians* can make to the academic and public discourse.⁴

More than most of the other human-made institutions that historians study, journalism suffers from the handicap of overfamiliarity. It seems too common—in every sense of the term—to merit serious attention. Everyone is constantly surrounded by journalism, everyone actively engages with it nearly every day, everyone from professionals to scholars to pundits to the person in the street has opinions about how it should work. It doesn’t seem to require any special skills or training the ordinary person doesn’t have, and it doesn’t earn itself very much respect.⁵ Despite the sometimes dizzying technological and economic transformations we’ve seen in recent decades, anyone who last glimpsed a newspaper or watched a thirty-minute evening news broadcast half a century ago would have no trouble recognizing either one today, while the principles generally associated with mainstream journalism—be fair, be responsible, be truthful—can seem self-evident to the casual eye, barely complex enough to *need* to evolve.

I feel certain that my mystery novelist would never have ordered a character from 1865 into a Sherman tank, for instance, or prescribed him a liver transplant, or shod him in Nikes. Nor would readers have failed to notice such evident whoppers. Weaponry, medicine, and fashion are the sort of visible, specialized, and fluid arenas in which anyone interested in the past will know full well he or she needs to tread carefully to get the facts correct. But a century-and-half-year-old world in which journalists not only publish

⁴Susan J. Douglas, “Does Textual Analysis Tell Us Anything about Past Audiences?,” and David Paul Nord, “The History of Journalism and the History of the Book,” both in *Explorations in Communication and History*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (London: Routledge, 2008), 66–76, 162–180. On “stuff,” see Charles H. Olin, *Journalism: Explains the Workings of a Modern Newspaper Office, and Gives Full Directions for Those Who Desire to Enter the Field of Journalism* (Philadelphia: Penn Publishing, 1910), 187.

⁵Anecdotal evidence of disrespect abounds in the popular culture, but attitudes have also been measured quantitatively—for instance, in the annual Gallup survey of how people rate the honesty and ethical standards of various professionals. In the most recent survey, newspaper reporters, besides barely edging out their colleagues on television, managed to outrank only lawyers, advertising practitioners, state officeholders, car salespeople, members of Congress, and lobbyists. See “Honesty/Ethics in Professions,” Gallup, survey taken December 5–8, 2013, accessed September 23, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>.

photographs in the paper but also brandish press passes, demand interviews from the powerful, and loftily explain that opinion is acceptable if it's on the editorial page—all of which, I went on to discover, my novelist allowed to happen in 1865—turns out to strike many readers as perfectly plausible. The novel attracted few professional reviews, but comments on readers' blogs and booksellers' sites were overwhelmingly positive, with many specifically praising the author's historical accuracy and feel for the past.

That a run-of-the-mill novel got away with some historical gaffes does not, of course, imperil the health of the republic. But the undetected errors are representative of the broader challenge to journalism history as it is seen across the spectrum from the scholarly world to the popular: not merely a failure of the historical imagination, it is also a general failure to imagine that a historical imagination about journalism is required in the first place. And this becomes particularly problematic when we consider another of those basics about journalism that are familiar to the point of invisibility: that while the purpose of most journalism is to convey fresh information about current affairs, sooner or later journalistic work either will fall victim to its ephemerality and vanish or it will quietly glide into the historical record. It becomes, in other words, an essential *source* of information about affairs that *used to* be current, a source to which historians and pundits often turn for insights that seem uniquely intimate and timely. And if they fail to imagine differences between, say, how readers engaged with the *New-York Daily Times* and how they approach www.nytimes.com—that can matter a great deal.

Take, for instance, an argument that pundits and academics alike regularly trot out just about every election season. Even though we may think present-day political commentary is bitter and negative, this argument goes, that it debases the discourse and alienates the public, things have always been that way: just look at how nasty and partisan the press was in the nineteenth century. The election of 1800 is routinely invoked; lurid quotations are gleefully flourished; James Callender's excoriations of Thomas Jefferson's morals fly once more.⁶

But in blithely lumping the Ann Coulters and Michael Moores of the world with Jefferson's nemesis, these commentators seem oblivious to critical differences that distinguish the relationships between publics and their journalism in the early nineteenth century and those of today. In 1800 the

⁶Examples of this argument are so prevalent that I hesitate to single out particular ones. A quick Google search brings up a long list of election-cycle articles and commentaries with titles such as "Partisan Politics? Take a Look at the 19th Century" (by a columnist who quotes a history professor); "The Dirtiest Presidential Campaign Ever? Not Even Close!" (by a political strategist and frequent talking head); "How Did Things Get This Bad? Polarization, Dysfunction, and the Collapse of Everything" (excerpt of a book by think-tank research fellow); and "The Election of 1800: The Birth of Negative Campaigning in the US" (by a professor of political science).

newspaper was the overwhelmingly dominant journalistic form. And in a raw nation that was attempting to implement a radically new, untried, and deeply controversial form of government, most papers were edited by party activists and openly supported by party funds for the express purpose of making the party's case in the urgent political debates of the day.

To attempt a counter-comparison, picture something like a scenario in which Americans neither had nor expected to have any other source for their news about the disputed presidential election of 2000 than the CBS Evening News with Newt Gingrich and the NBC Nightly News with James Carville. But the implication of the perennial arguments, purposeful or not, that the Coulters and the Moores are simply carrying on the grand old American tradition of hyperpartisanship is more than misleading and incomplete; it does more than ignore the enormous differences dividing the assumptions, expectations, economic imperatives, and political traditions of the news-reading publics of 1800 from those of 2000. It also suggests that complaining about negative political coverage is silly and trying to change it futile.

Another challenge to the historical imagination in our field comes from the long and intimate association of journalism with democracy and the work of citizenship, an association especially strong in the United States, whose founders actively promoted and protected the newspaper press as an engine of self-government. Few scholars indeed would disagree that journalism is an essential—if sometimes controversial or disappointing—participant in civic life, or that exploring the nature and consequences of that participation is a worthy endeavor. But the urgency (and prestige) of that endeavor can distract us from another characteristic of journalism. Under its huge umbrella have always clustered a vast variety of forms, genres, and conventions, many of which bear little visible connection to democracy or citizenship or even “self-evident” principles such as fairness and responsibility and truthfulness—many of which, in fact, carry the clear imprint of the feisty marketplace culture that is another institution strongly associated with the United States. Some journalistic work is indeed important for democracy. Some of it, particularly in the freewheeling era before the turn toward professionalization, is highly vulnerable to misinterpretation by those whose historical imagination is immovably fixed on the side of democracy.

As I look back now on my various research projects on the evolution of reporting and truth-telling conventions in the nineteenth-century United States, I am struck by how much time I've spent with humbugs, exaggerators, jokers, rowdies, and fakes.⁷ I'm intrigued by the way so many of these tricksters insisted that their work was both honest and public-spirited, while

⁷See, for instance, Andie Tucher, “The True, the False, and the ‘Not Exactly Lying’: Making Fakes and Telling Stories in the Age of the Real Thing,” in *Literature and Journalism: Inspirations, Intersections, and Inventions from Ben Franklin to Stephen Colbert*, ed. Mark Canada (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 91–118.

others who were perfectly open about their wiles also claimed that everything they did was for the public good. And I'm left pondering: what, exactly, did *real* or *true* mean to readers and journalists alike in those contexts? How did they decide? What public and private purposes were served by a journalism that apparently did not tell stories intended or expected to be truthful? And how can a historian know?

For the sheer variety, audacity, and complexity of his entanglements with journalistic truth-telling, and for a CrossFit-level workout of the historical imagination based on textual analysis, contextual research, and searchable digital databases, it's hard to beat Julius Chambers.

In his day, Chambers "touched the highest heights of journalism." He began his career in 1870 as a reporter for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, went on to spend fifteen years occupying just about every editorial desk at James Gordon Bennett Jr.'s *New York Herald* and helping to establish its Paris edition, jumped in 1889 to the managing editorship of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, and for the last sixteen years of his life wrote a popular column for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. At the peak of his career, he was so well paid that his salary frequently drew admiring mention in the press, and his involvement as a defendant in several libel suits, including one brought posthumously on behalf of the department-store mogul Alexander T. Stewart, seemed only to enhance his reputation for fearless reporting. In his spare time, he studied law at Columbia University; wrote scores of short stories, novels, and plays; and, long before any standalone journalism school ever opened its doors, was teaching journalism courses at New York University and Cornell. A longtime friend of Walt Whitman's, he contrived to slip money to the impecunious poet by carrying him on the *Herald's* books, and at Whitman's funeral he was one of the chief pallbearers.⁸

Although never as colorful a personality as some of his contemporaries (a tall order, given that one of them was the uxoricidal *World* editor Charles Chapin), Chambers is remembered to this day for his last book, *News Hunting on Three Continents*, which scholars still routinely cite for its insights into the practices and techniques of the work of reporting during a pivotal era in the development of the metropolitan mass press. (I've cited him myself.) Published in 1921, shortly after Chambers's death at the age of nearly seventy, the book clearly presents itself as a truthful autobiographical account. The introduction, written in the third person, describes the youthful "craving for adventure" that had led Chambers into a "heart and soul" embrace of

⁸"Julius Chambers," *The Journalist*, August 26, 1893, 3; "Large Salaries: Tempting Morsels for Able Men," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 1, 1887, 7 (reporting a salary of \$10,000 at the *Herald*); "General Gossip of Authors and Writers," *Current Literature* 4 (May 1890): 346 (reporting \$12,000 at the *World*); Thomas Donaldson, *Walt Whitman the Man* (New York: Harper, 1896), 198, 272. See also *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, suppl. 1, 1910, and *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., "Chambers, James Julius."

the newspaper world and the declared ambition of becoming the managing editor of the *Herald*, “at that time the most famous journal in America, if not in the world.” And he succeeded. “Without the aid of wealth or influence,” the introduction concludes, “the author attained his ambition at the age of thirty-five and enjoyed a glorious existence. Herein are a few experiences in various countries among all sorts and conditions of men.”⁹

The rest of the volume, written mainly in the first person, is full of irresistible inside dope about the drama and adventure of the journalist’s life, all of it showing a storyteller’s pleasure in character, drama, and dialogue: he journeyed by canoe to identify the source of the Mississippi River, he went undercover to investigate the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum, he helped a distraught druggist track down the woman to whom he had mistakenly sold arsenic, he smashed Philadelphia’s Tammany Ring, he solved the Campaneau case and the Hawkins killing, he came close to recovering the famous four-year-old kidnap victim Charley Ross, he insinuated himself into a band of harbor pirates, he was able to track down a murderer by tracing a conversation he heard over crossed telephone wires.

Best known, perhaps, is his account of how, in a stroke of rookie luck, his Deke fraternity pin landed him his first job, at Greeley’s *Tribune*, a paper every bit as prestigious as the *Herald* was famous. His childhood in Bellefontaine, Ohio, as he described it in the first chapter, had been nothing short of Dickensian: his mother died young, he was raised by his grandfather, he went to work at eleven as a printer’s devil, his father’s business failure at the end of his sophomore year forced him to choose between dropping out of Cornell or working his way through as a printer. Upon graduation, he made for the big city, arriving in New York “a stranger,” he wrote, “and with a capital of thirty dollars. I carried no letters of introduction and had not a friend in the city.” Undaunted, he began knocking on the doors of the big New York papers, and after a string of rejections found a sympathetic flunky at the *Tribune* who got him an interview with Horace Greeley’s powerful deputy, Whitelaw Reid. Reid was already turning Julius away when he noticed the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity pin on the young man’s waistcoat. Leaping up, he offered the secret Deke handshake, and “with boyish enthusiasm” hired his young “brother” on the spot.¹⁰ The rest was history.

Huge chunks of the book, however, were not.

News Hunting had been one of the first sources I’d turned to when I began researching the evolution of reporting in the later nineteenth century.

⁹Julius Chambers, *News Hunting on Three Continents* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1921; London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1922), ix–x.

¹⁰Chambers, *News Hunting*, 2–6. Paul Lancaster, for instance, in *Gentleman of the Press: The Life and Times of an Early Reporter, Julian Ralph of the “Sun”* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 42–44, cites the Deke story as an example of how young reporters in that era found their first jobs.

Some of it sounded a bit purple, certainly, but not out of line with the literary tastes of Chambers's era, and his important journalistic credentials and the longtime acceptance of the book as autobiographical at first seemed validation enough.¹¹ But later, after the proliferation of new digitization projects and searchable databases had inspired me to seek out his original articles to use as case studies, I came to realize that while even some of the most dramatic of the thirty chapters were rooted, at least, in verifiable events and referred to stories that actually did run in the papers, many others were either lavishly embellished or flat-out invented.

Chambers did, in fact, earn membership in the Royal Geographical Society for his explorations of the headwaters of the Mississippi, he did infiltrate the river pirates' crew, he did investigate the insane asylum (fifteen years before Nellie Bly earned lasting fame for the same stunt), he did expose Tammany in Philadelphia. But I turned up not a single mention in any genuine news source of any such thing as the Campanneau case, the Hawkins killing, that poor druggist with his errant arsenic; these episodes never happened in real life. Those implacable search engines did, however, reveal that at least half the stories in the book *had* happened, often in slightly different forms, in *another* life: in the fiction that Chambers had published in literary magazines later in his career when he was devoting himself mainly to imaginative literature.

The story of the careless druggist, for instance, had appeared twenty-seven years earlier in the feature section of the *Los Angeles Times*, credited to a syndicate best known for its fiction, and was told in the voice of the druggist himself, not the newshound in hot pursuit of a story. The affair of the crossed telephone wires, as told in *News Hunting* in a chapter entitled "I Hear Murder Done," began with Chambers at home "on a street near Riverside Drive" in Manhattan. When it first ran back in 1903 in *London Magazine* as "'Seven, Seven, Seven—City': A Tale of the Telephone," the first-person narrator lived in the British capital on the west side of Regents Park. And the account of how a clever and tireless reporter proved Marie Campanneau innocent of murder had first appeared in 1903 in a magazine noted for its fiction as one of a series of "Little Stories of Journalism." In *News Hunting*, the account was nearly identical except for the addition of a telling final sentence. "And only for the 'journalism that does things,'" the chapter concluded in a triumphant panegyric to the enterprise of *his* kind of

¹¹It is, for instance, listed in the "Reporting" section of Carl L. Cannon, *Journalism: A Bibliography* (New York: Public Library, 1924), 277; in the "Biography" section of Warren C. Price, *The Literature of Journalism: An Annotated Bibliography* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1959), 70; and in the "Newspaper People at Work" section of Richard A. Schwarzlose, *Newspapers: A Reference Guide* (New York: Greenwood, 1987), 76. *Dictionary of American Biography* calls *News Hunting* "a good human-interest account of a reporter's life."

(real, genuine) newspaper, “Marie Campaneau would have sacrificed her life for the honor of her family.”¹²

The romantic story of his early life was also heavily revised. Although Julius’s mother did, in fact, die when the boy was a toddler, local and genealogical sources reveal that Julius grew up in the prosperous household of his remarried father, a philanthropically minded merchant. Rather than a pitiful waif’s contribution to the family larder, therefore, his childhood job as a printer’s devil was most likely an introduction to the family business, the *Bellefontaine Republican*, an important GOP paper operated by his wealthy and politically connected maternal uncles. Julius didn’t even enter Cornell until his junior year, having transferred from a small Methodist college, and he took his job at the university’s press not to bail out his poor bankrupt dad but because it was standard practice, both expected and encouraged by university officials, for students to work at “self-supporting labor” during the term.¹³

As for the legend of the frat pin and the *Tribune* job—it’s probably true that Julius himself, a brand-new college graduate born and reared in the Midwest, did not have a single friend in the alien and heartless metropolis of New York. On the other hand, his uncles back in Ohio certainly did. Cronies of Governor Salmon P. Chase, they had ardently supported their governor for the presidential nomination in 1864, as had another Ohio journalist and active Republican they must have known well. That fellow journalist had quickly risen from the editorship of the small-town *Xenia News* to the big leagues as a war correspondent and in 1868 ended up—as Greeley’s deputy on the *New York Tribune*. So it was doubtless Julius’s powerful uncles, not his Deke pin or the secret handshake, that Whitelaw Reid recognized when he hired that “friendless” young fraternity brother looking for a newspaper job.¹⁴

¹²On the druggist, Chambers, “An Ounce of Arsenic,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1894, 13, crediting the Bachelier & Johnson Syndicate, and *News Hunting*, 13–18; on the crossed wires, Chambers, ““Seven, Seven, Seven—City’: A Tale of the Telephone,” *London Magazine*, November 1903), 403–410, and *News Hunting*, 368–390; on Campaneau, “Little Stories of Journalism V,” *The Reader*, March 1904, 351–357, and *News Hunting*, 141–148.

¹³Marker in the Bellefontaine cemetery for Sarabella Chambers, June 14, 1829–April 1, 1853: “Genealogy and Local History in Logan County, Ohio: Cemeteries: Lake Township—Bellefontaine Cemetery,” accessed September 23, 2014, <http://logan.ohiogenealogy.info/cem/labec.html>; Julius appears as “Jas. G.” in the household of his father, Jos. Chambers, US Federal Census, 1860, Ohio, Logan County, Bellefontaine, accessed September 23, 2014, <http://tiny.cc/mrb18w> at the subscription database Ancestry.com; on the uncles, James and Samuel Walker: W. H. Perrin and J. H. Battle, *History of Logan County and Ohio* (Chicago: Baskin, 1880), 284. Some of the Cornell students assigned to “self-supporting labor” worked at the university press: *The Cornell University: What It Is and What It Is Not* (Ithaca: University Press, 1872), 24–26.

¹⁴Uncle James Walker served as county prosecutor, as mayor of Bellefontaine, and as a government loan agent during the Civil War: Perrin, *Logan County*, 615; “Judge James

Chambers was certainly not the first memoirist—and he won't be the last—to be unmasked as a spinner of yarns. And some of the crowd-pleasing extravaganzas of this volume may well have been inspired by the most banal of reasons: by the end of his life, the famously well-paid journalist was broke. Very few traces of his private life remain, but he seems to have followed a well-trodden and predictably expensive path; in the 1890s, after more than two decades of marriage, he divorced the mother of his children and took a second wife some twenty years his junior. And while the new couple began their wedded life in the apparent comfort of a Philadelphia rowhouse tended by three live-in Irish maids, by the year of his death Julius and Margaret had been reduced to a boarding house in the East 30s in Manhattan. He stated in his will that the only possessions he could leave to his son were two burial plots and his “unsullied name.”¹⁵

We could simply brand Chambers as a fraud, but a more historically imaginative interpretation suggests something else: an intricate and mutually pleasurable relationship between the journalist and readers who had a pretty good idea of what he was up to. Even if they had never come across any of the installments in the magazine series he cozily titled “Chats on Journalism,” or his other articles in popular periodicals about the newspaper business, readers of the *Herald*, the paper with which his name was most closely associated, nonetheless knew that it was *not* the paper to pick for pages full of serious fact-based articles about matters of weighty civic importance. For Chambers himself, who in his first “Chat” was noticeably dismissive of the pretensions of his line of work, the definition of journalism was clear: it “may be defined as ‘The Art of Making the Newspaper.’ It must be regarded as a commercial enterprise—a mechanical and intellectual art—rather than a ‘profession.’ This latter word is a much-abused one, and is affected by barbers, chiropodists and barn-storming actors.” In a later “Chat,” he scoffed at the notion that a journalist’s “first duty” was to the “great public.” That

Walker,” obituary, *Clinton Public*, August 7, 1885, transcribed on Rootsweb.com, accessed September 23, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/n3snm9u>; Bingham Duncan, *Whitelaw Reid: Journalist, Politicians, Diplomat* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), 23.

¹⁵James J. Chambers and Ida B. Lane were married in 1874: “Massachusetts Marriages, 1841–1915,” FamilySearch, accessed September 23, 2014, <https://familysearch.org/pal:mm9.1.1/n44q-756>. I have found no information about their divorce, but census records as well as family information posted on the Find a Grave website by a woman describing herself as Julius’s great-granddaughter confirm his remarriage by 1900. See “Ida Burgess Chambers,” <http://tiny.cc/06o68w>, and “Julius Chambers” on findagrave.com, accessed September 23, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/jvnwce7>. Ida Chambers (living with her mother and son), US Federal Census, 1900, Lowell, Mass., <http://tinyurl.com/levu4nh>; Julius and Margaret Chambers, US Federal Census, 1900, Pennsylvania, PA, <http://tiny.cc/dr778w>; Julius and Margaret Chambers (with one servant), US Federal Census, 1910, New York, NY, <http://tinyurl.com/plzxxax>; and Julius and Margaret Chambers, US Federal Census, 1920, New York, NY, <http://tiny.cc/lgp68w>; all on the subscription database Ancestry.com, accessed September 23, 2014. “Julius Chambers’s Will,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1920, 8.

idea, he said, “is fast wearing out”; the larger public is, in fact, “indifferent, cold, not to say sneering” in its appreciation of the work of the correspondent, he continued, whose “direct and immediate responsibilities” must instead be limited to his own paper and its patrons.¹⁶

We can’t know whether readers who picked up *News Hunting* in 1921 specifically recalled that the last time they’d read about the desperate druggist he had been a fictional character placed in a city on the other side of the continent. But Chambers’s “autobiography” would not have struck his readers as wildly different in tone and spirit from the *Herald*, where they were thoroughly accustomed to navigating within a single page through a whole range of grave, playful, important, provocative, offensive, arch, and nakedly commercial items. They were experienced in making judgments about how to approach a given piece—as they certainly would have done in the famous and typically antic issue of the *Herald* that appeared just a month after Chambers was appointed its managing editor, on one page of which a dozen or so two- and three-line variations on the chest-thumping slogan “WE ARE THE STUFF” were interspersed among everything from a report of a matricide in France to an account of an Amateur Comedy Club supper at Delmonico’s to a smirking critique of a political comment by the *Tribune*.¹⁷

The relationship between writer, reader, and truth becomes even more complicated when we consider that for what would be his final book, Chambers, who by the end of his life was just as well known for his fiction as for his journalism, chose not only to embellish his own career but also to repurpose so many of his fictions as fact and then to cast the whole bundle as a “true” account. Perhaps he simply felt that an autobiographical presentation of a rip-roaring reporter would sell better than a novel would—in other words, that his readers would like it better. But he also left himself an escape hatch. If we go back and look carefully at the introduction to *News Hunting*, we realize that, despite its forthright representations of authenticity, it ended on a note that was decidedly coy. “Herein are a few experiences in various countries among all sorts and conditions of men,” Chambers wrote, and his editor, noting at the end that the author had died while the book was in press, insisted that “the book is as he intended it to be—a characteristic record of wide activities and unusual experience of men and affairs.”¹⁸ And exactly whose experiences are those? Of which men? Neither one is *exactly* lying—neither one is saying flat-out they were *this* author’s. He was leaving that to his readers to decide.

¹⁶Chambers, “Chats on Journalism [I],” *Once a Week*, May 31, 1892, 7; “Chats on Journalism VII: The Special Correspondent of To-Day,” *Once a Week*, December 3, 1892, 6.

¹⁷*Herald*, November 24, 1886, 6. Chambers was said to have come up with the gimmick to boost circulation, which reportedly “went up like a rocket for that day at least”: “Men One Meets,” *Harrisburg (Pa.) Daily Patriot*, October 3, 1889, 1.

¹⁸Chambers, *News Hunting*, x.

But he was also creating something of a meta-commentary on journalistic work: not only was his protagonist, the “I” of his book, more appealing to readers than either a cold-eyed professional or a real-life overworked and underpaid ink-stained wretch would be, but he also sounded true to life because he was already so familiar through the fiction of such writers as Richard Harding Davis and Chambers himself. Whether they chose to accept it as literally truthful, readers were well primed to enjoy what they saw as a lifelike portrait of a sharp and unflappable shoelather man who tracked down the bad guys, comforted the afflicted, and crusaded for justice, who could dash off to New Orleans or Paris at a moment’s notice, who could buckle his swash with the best of them but whose modest roots lent him a touching humility—and who quietly but clearly claimed to be the heir of his former chief Horace Greeley, the most famous and, in many quarters, the most beloved journalist of the century. It was not, I think, accidental that Chambers’s embroidered story of coming as a friendless and nearly penniless young man to the big city and lucking into a job bears distinct echoes of the story Greeley told himself in his own popular memoir—just as Greeley’s memoir recalls that of an even more famous printer and newspaperman, Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography describes his arrival at seventeen in Philadelphia toting “three great puffy rolls” and not much else.¹⁹

News Hunting was not widely reviewed in the United States, possibly because the book was both posthumous and a pastiche, but then again no one felt compelled to expose it either. Strikingly, however, the international press, in which the figure of the bumptious American reporter was a frequent object of fascination and bemusement, afforded it both attention and respect. While expressing a few gentle reservations about one or another chapter, the *Irish Times*, the *New Statesman*, the *Spectator*, the *London Saturday Review*, the *Independent and Weekly Review*, and the *Times Literary Supplement* accepted *News Hunting* as a generally accurate and compelling portrait of “the complete American journalist,” as the *New Statesman* described him. The *TLS* did feel compelled to rumble about methods that were often “unscrupulous” and work that “was what most people would regard as dirty.” But even so, conceded that august journal, “it is impossible not to admire the thoroughness with which [Chambers] did it.”²⁰ These distant reviewers were *just*

¹⁹Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: Ford, 1868), 83–85, tells of leaving his New England home at twenty and arriving in New York “with ten dollars in my pocket. . . I knew no human being within two hundred miles.” Knocking on doors was unsuccessful, and it was the intervention of kindly strangers that found him work. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, ed. Peter Conn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 23–24, describes arriving dirty, hungry, and tired in Philadelphia, where he “knew no soul” and had just a “Dutch dollar” and some laundry in his pockets.

²⁰“Books of the Week,” *Irish Times*, July 14, 1922, 2; “Shorter Notices,” *New Statesman*, July 1, 1922, 368; “*News Hunting on Three Continents*,” *Spectator*, May 20, 1922, 628; “A Reporter’s Note-Book: *News Hunting on Three Continents*,” *Saturday Review*, May 20,

familiar enough with how the American reporter worked to fall for a picture that fully confirmed their preconceptions.

Just familiar enough to get things wrong. The reason journalism history matters is not that mystery novelists make a hash of their characters' motives or that historians misuse a playful fantasia on a journalist's life as a source for one. Journalism history matters because it guides us to open our historical imaginations to the complex, contingent, sometimes surprising, and always illuminating process of how past societies made meaning in common. Journalism history matters because we can't use journalism to know about history—or to know about the present, either—without knowing how journalism worked *in* history. And journalism historians are the ones to lead that effort.

1922, 526–527; Edmund Lester Pearson, “New Books and Old,” *Independent and the Weekly Review*, October 8, 1921, 38; [Francis Henry Gribble], “The Scarlet Journalism,” *Times Literary Supplement*, November 19, 1921, 745.