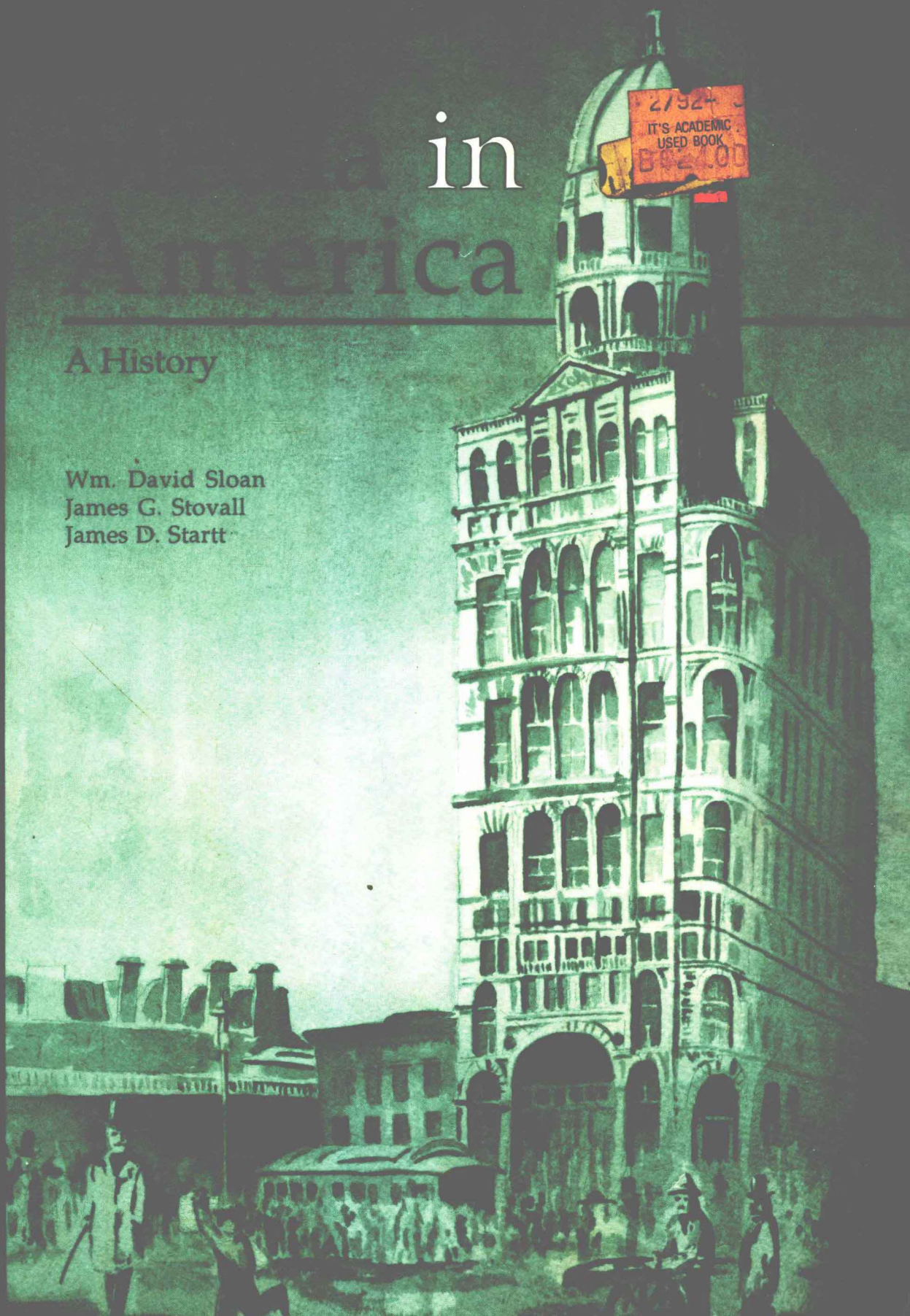


America in America

A History

Wm. David Sloan
James G. Stovall
James D. Startt



The Media in America

A History

Wm. David Sloan
James G. Stovall, editors

James D. Startt, associate editor

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Cecilia Hammond, Cheryl Parker, Jeff Smith, and Vermont Beverly of the University of Alabama provided assistance in the production of this book.

A NATION AND ITS MEDIA

The history of America's mass media is the history of America itself. It is tied inextricably to the life of the nation – just as the present is bound unbreakably to the past. To understand the mass media today, one has to understand their history, and the history of America's mass media cannot be understood apart from the history of the nation. Nor can America's past be understood without consideration of its mass media. They are intertwined. The nation's politics, its system of economics, religion, education, and its people have all been responsible in creating the mass media system. Likewise, the nature of the American people, their nation, and its many parts have all felt the impact of the mass media.

This book tells the story of those intertwined lives.

The history of the media in America is one of vast contrasts: in the American character, in events, in technology, in politics and economics, in religion, in intellect, in human relations and desires – in short, it is the history of a people and their network, the mass media, that has tied them together. It is the story of how the media have been used to shape Americans' aspirations and to define and achieve their goals – and how they sometimes have helped create problems for a society of millions of citizens with differing values and beliefs. It is the story of the huge central nervous system that has made it possible for the many and diverse parts of America to communicate and mold their relationship with one another.

It is, in essence, the story of American life itself. Just as life grows and changes, so have the mass media. Historians disagree about what

the nature of historical change is, but if there is a truism in historical study, it is that history is essentially the story of change. In American mass media history, the change is readily evident. The changes have been dynamic and dramatic. What began as small printing enterprises that were limited in scope have become huge and technologically diverse institutions with worldwide impact. In the history of that transition, the media have changed from publications with individual personalities closely involved with the deepest feelings of their readers to depersonalized institutions separated from other parts of society and yet still playing a major role in it.

Mass media history in America began in full with the founding of newspapers in colonial times. Started with the purpose of providing information useful to merchants and foreign news interesting to early Americans, they soon became full participants in a revolutionary movement of democratic ideas that permanently transformed America. Sharing the passion for an ideological and a governmental system that would best serve the nation, they played a crucial role in the nation's early political development. Moving from staunch partisanship, the media in the mid-1800s began to identify more with the aspirations for improvement and progress that were so strong in the American character. Popular ideas, social reform, mass democracy, and debates about the appropriateness and value of each became inseparable from the essential nature of the media. In the twentieth century, as attitudes on wealth and industrial efficiency gained stronger and stronger hold on American attitudes, the nature of the mass media changed also. Professionalism and business operations came to play a critical role in the mass media. Once so tightly intertwined with the core of American society and life, the media today have become in many ways detached observers of a society placed at a professional distance. Yet, the media remain integral to American life, still serving as one of the primary means by which all its parts connect with the whole.

About This Book

This book chronicles the changes in the American mass media. In doing so, its essential aim is not to provide simply an encyclopedia of facts. It is to provide the student with an understanding of the fundamentals of American mass media history. The design is to present a knowledgeable and thoughtful survey of media history – knowledgeable in that the narrative is based on the authors' familiarity with historical sources, and thoughtful in their assessment and presentation of the material. The emphasis is not on voluminous details, dates, and names. While such material is used selectively, it is included not because of a sense of obligation to list every American journalist of the slightest importance who ever lived, as media history textbooks have been prone to do, but because the individuals, events, and dates selected are outstanding or

representative examples that help explain the nature of the media. Thus, the reader will notice that emphasis is on insight rather than mere cataloguing.

This book varies in a number of other ways from the other textbooks that have been published on media history.

***The most obvious is its multi-author approach.**

The many other books used by generations of students demonstrate that it is virtually impossible for a single author to have done enough study to understand the subtleties of the entire history of America's mass media. Multiple authors have been selected for this book because they bring expertise to the particular periods they discuss and because they possess thorough familiarity with the historical literature on the period and with the media themselves. Each author has done advanced study and has previously written on the topic of his or her chapter.

The aim is to present a solid story that reveals, as best as can be done, the true nature of the media in history and explain why that nature was as it was. In explaining each historical period, chapters use a sharp thematic focus covering the essential character of each period. They avoid presenting the history as simply a loose collection of assorted and unrelated pieces of information.

***In explaining media history, the authors have considered the specialized works of other historians, but they have relied for the most part on primary sources.**

Textbooks that use other books and journal articles as their main sources of information always run the risk of giving a distorted picture of history. The writing of media history too often has been the rewriting of works by earlier historians who rewrote the works of earlier historians. Only by looking thoughtfully at the media themselves and at the records left by contemporaries can the historian be assured of revealing history accurately. Without a consideration of those primary sources, one cannot truly understand history.

***This book avoids superficiality of explanation.**

Too much writing on media history has suffered from the problem of "present-mindedness." That is, historians have written from the professional perspective of their own generation and have tried to impose the standards of their own time on the past. They have written history in a way to try to make it conform to the mold of the present. Such an approach is not only artificial but misleading. Thus, most histories of the mass media have tried to explain the media of the past in terms of how they contributed to the development and progress of professional standards and conditions of the present. As a result, much writing of media history comes across as uncritical, in-house publicity in praise of the media rather than as serious, detached study. That method of looking at the past falsifies history. The approach used in

this book is to examine the media within their own times. The historians then attempt to explain in a thoughtful way the performance of the media in each period, rather than rely on glib thinking that is based more on interest in the present than the past. The authors also have eschewed the simplistic Progressive ideological perspective ("good liberals vs. bad conservatives") that has marked much of the writing of media history.

***Each chapter ties the media into the history of the period.**

Chapters avoid approaching the media as isolated from the rest of society, and they do more than present a sketch of the historical background against which the media functioned. The history of the mass media cannot be explained without being integrated into the history of America, and the reader will find in this book the explanation of the media developed in terms of their setting. The result, we hope, will be that the reader will gain a deeper understanding of media history.

***The topical treatment is broader than that found in most previous textbooks.**

Whereas American mass media history often has been told as an extension of metropolitan journalism in the northeast, especially New York City, this book gives fuller treatment to non-metropolitan media and recognizes that history occurred in places other than the northeastern seaboard. Also given deeper consideration are such topics as minorities and the media, women, broadcasting, advertising, magazines, and other forms of mass communication.

***While serious in scholarship, each chapter is written in a way to appeal to a general audience.**

One mark of good history is good writing. Although each chapter is based on rigorous historical scholarship, the goal has been to present history in a readable style that is understandable not only to professional historians but to non-historians as well.

***At the end of each chapter is a short list of recommended readings.**

Since length constraints prevent survey textbooks from covering topics in exhaustive detail, students often must do further reading to acquire a knowledge of depth. The recommended readings serve as a guide for students looking for the most useful literature. The intent has not been to include every book and article published on the topic. Instead, a reasonable number of books and articles which the authors and editors believe provide the best insight into history are included. They have been selected from a bibliography of more than 3,000 works which were considered for topical significance and for quality of research, explanation, and presentation. Special consideration has been given to recent works that demonstrate superior scholarship and that have con-

tributed significantly to our understanding of the past. For those who wish to embark on the exciting quest to understand media history, the books and articles are good places to start.

Careful readers of this book will realize that the chapter authors not only know their subjects thoroughly but that they have opinions about their subjects. That is as it should be. Good history is not merely a recantation of available facts about the past, but it is an explanation of those facts. Historians set those facts in a context and judge them within an analytic framework. The ideas presented here will, we hope, provoke readers of this book to further study and thinking about media history.

The Editors

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