
MESSAGES 2

The Washington Post

MEDIA COMPANION



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THE WASHINGTON POST WRITERS GROUP

Messages 2

The Washington Post
Media Companion

The Washington Post Writers Group

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Publisher's Foreword

The book you hold in your hand is unusual in mass communication education. Most compilations of articles on media are on the scholarly side, and while very useful, are somewhat removed from our daily experience of media. They are glances from afar. We set out to publish something closer to the action.

The mass media today have unprecedented impact on our daily lives. We are bombarded by messages of every sort: informative, entertaining, and most of all, persuasive. We are daily persuaded to buy something, vote for someone, or think a certain way about a company or an institution or a government. In the face of this saturation it is easy to become desensitized, to stop thinking clearly or critically about the messages we are asked to process. That is a mistake, particularly for the student of communication, who like all of us is a user of media, but who one day may also be one of its creators.

But if the media are the source of so many messages, they also provide the vehicles for understanding them. In this book you will find 92 articles on the media from the pages of the *Washington Post*, itself one of the most prominent voices of one of the oldest, most prominent mass media. Individually these pieces range from straightforward news stories on media industries and issues, to profiles of media creators, to thoughtful overviews of trends in media today. And that is exactly their value; their focus on the media today. Together, these articles are a cross-sectional look at the mass media and their place in our society over the last few years. They are not scholarly. They are day-to-day dispatches from the front lines.

In organization, *Messages: The Washington Post Media Companion* closely parallels the structure of the usual beginning course in mass communication. It is intended to be used as a supplement to a regular textbook, or to an instructor's notes, both of which will provide depth, rigor, and a grounding in history and research. It is our hope that what *Messages* will provide is good writing from one of the great newspapers of the day. Enjoy.

Preface to the Second Edition

Since the first edition of *Messages* appeared nearly two years ago the media have achieved a watershed. Scholarly and popular observers remark every day on the accelerating pace of technology and American life, and nowhere is this trend more evident to most of us than in the media.

Consider the following current trends.

A major book publisher has recently signed an agreement with a major computer manufacturer to bring new books and classics to disc. Magazine publishers continue to narrow their publishing and advertising horizons based on cheap, plentiful, and sometimes painfully accurate demographic data on individuals. The news media are able for the first time to broadcast an entire war as it happens, with no delays for even rudimentary editorial judgments, yet bridle under under new sets of Pentagon-imposed press restrictions. The telephone companies won the right to enter the information-delivery business, over the objections of the cable TV industry, effectively ending ten years of unregulated cable growth. Political candidates are turning to the popular media to get their messages across, appearing on the Phil Donohue, Larry King, and Arsenio Hall shows instead of the official but little-watched political round tables. And the press, both popular and serious, wrestle with questions of media access to private lives, with the tabloid press sometimes showing greater reserve.

The remarkable thing about these and other upheavals in the media is that they are not new. If the media can be fairly accused of caring most about their own profitability, and of relying on formula and the lowest common denominator to ensure that profitability, then it can also be fairly said that the media reinvent themselves every few years. They have to. Any medium that remains static eventually stagnates, as a look at the big three television networks reveals.

Messages 2: The Washington Post Media Companion, reexamines media from some surprising new angles. Of the 92 articles contained here, 66 are new. Nearly every piece appeared in the *Washington Post* more recently than July of 1990, and most date from 1991 and 1992. The article of oldest vintage, retained from the first edition, is Katharine Graham's thoughtful *Safeguarding Our Freedoms as We Cover Terrorist Acts*, which remains as relevant today as when it was written in April, 1986.

The *Washington Post* is in the front rank of America's daily newspapers. All of the writers collected here are thoughtful and expert reporters. Some of them—Tom Shales, Jonathan Yardley, Howard Kurtz, and Martha Sherrill, to name just a few—

are among the most prominent voices in their profession. We extend out thanks to them all, and especially to William Dickinson and Robert Lyford, of the Washington Post Writers Group, for their help with this new edition.

We also extend our thanks to the over one hundred professors who adopted the original *Messages* for their classes in Mass Communication, and to the thousands of students who used the text. We took your comments very much to heart when planning and implementing this revision. Especially helpful were the extended critiques of the following reviewers: Roya Akhavan Majid, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale; Thomas Beell, Iowa State University; Hoyt Purvis, University of Arkansas; and Scott Shamp, University of Georgia.

As the media approach their next watershed, never further away than just around the corner, we continue to welcome the criticism of our readers. If you would like to comment on any of the articles in *Messages 2*, we invite you to write us here at Allyn and Bacon, 160 Gould Street, Needham Heights, Massachusetts, 02194.

Preface to the First Edition

John Campbell launched the first successful American newspaper—the *Boston News-Letter*—in 1704. For fifteen years he enjoyed a monopoly in the colonies. Then, James Franklin, the more celebrated Benjamin’s older brother, began publishing the *New-England Courant* and became America’s first “media critic.” Campbell’s newspaper, he said in the first issue of the *Courant*, suffered from an excess of “dullness.” Campbell responded with a denial and demanded chapter and verse. Franklin had the last word:

“[The critic] need not tell you where you’re flat and dull; “Your Works declare, ‘tis in your skull.”

In the subsequent history of the American media, criticism has had uneven traditions. Newspapers criticized one another vigorously and frequently in the 19th Century. The *New York Courier and Inquirer* announced in 1836 that “we are compelled, for the first time, to soil our columns with an allusion to a beggarly outcast [James Gordon Bennett] who daily sends forth a dirty sheet in this city under the title of “*The Herald*.” Bennett could hold his own in that company. He said of Horace Greeley’s *Tribune*: “The *Tribune* establishment, from top to bottom has been recently converted into a socialistic phalanx...that has produced on public affairs and the public mind a more deleterious, anti-Christian, and infidel effect...than all the publications that have hitherto appeared from the time of Voltaire.”

This critical tradition—or polemic, as the case may be—is a relic of the past insofar as newspapers are concerned. The ownership of the American press is now concentrated in a relative handful of large communications conglomerates. Local monopolies have arisen in virtually all of our cities. So there are few competitors left to criticize. Self-criticism is a rarity and where it exists is rarely aggressive. Some of the slack has been taken up by the “alternative press,” by both local and national magazines and by various authors and academicians. But the audience for these forms of criticism is limited and, so far as we can tell, so is the impact.

The critical tradition has never existed within the broadcasting industry and has not taken hold despite the ever-growing competitiveness within the broadcasting marketplace. The evening news programs have very sizable local and national audiences that undoubtedly would be receptive to press criticism, for example, or to criticism of local and network news practices. A thorough investigation of the techniques of “60 Minutes” by its competitor, “20-20” would be made into

fascinating television. But broadcasters, out of a sense of vulnerability or for other commercial reasons, do not nurture programming of that nature.

So the burden of broadcasting criticism falls primarily on newspapers and magazines. That is true with respect to literature, films, the recording industry, and other expressions of the popular culture. Much of what is done along these lines may not qualify as true "criticism," which is often defined as systematic analysis within a framework of certain aesthetic and philosophical principles and standards; academic work, in a word. The book, film or record review, by way of contrast is designed, essentially, to introduce an audience to a new work or production. In that sense its critical value may be of less significance than its commercial value as a form of publicity.

In any case, it is newspaper and magazine writers who produce the reviews, the criticism and the commentary on our popular culture and its various media of communication and art. As you will find in these essays, writers approach these critical tasks not only from abstract aesthetic positions but from political, sociological, ethical, and historical perspectives as well. They promote some value systems and seek to discredit others; they can be preachy on subjects such as ethics, social justice, highbrows, and lowbrows. They may disagree on definitions of obscenity and pornography and the political implications involved.

But in demographic terms, the essayists represented in this volume have much in common in addition to a common employer, *The Washington Post*. We are, without exception and by government definition, members of the upper middle class. Racially, we are overwhelmingly (but not entirely) white. Few of us have had special training or instruction in the arts and crafts of "criticism." We tend to come out of universities and colleges with degrees in the liberal arts, with interest in politics and popular culture, with general experience as newspaper reporters and with present assignments that are to one degree or another the result of happenstance rather than design. There is, thus, an accidental and amateurish quality to much of what we do. But it is a quality that can lend freshness, authenticity and variety to the work.

Editors at *The Post* have for many years encouraged the development of popular and relevant forms of criticism and created in various sections—Style, Book World, and Outlook, among others—forums in which it all fits and from which most of these pieces were taken.

Richard Harwood
Ombudsman
The Washington Post

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Books and Publishing 1

Pantheon Publisher Departs

ELEANOR RANDOLPH

At first, the publisher's abrupt departure at Pantheon Books seemed like one of those strange little whirlwinds that ruffle the shirttails of only a few effete New Yorkers.

But the real issue at Pantheon is whether there is room in the book-publishing business for good books that don't make big bucks. Pantheon has always been a small, serious house that publishes authors concerned about world issues. Jean-Paul Sartre, Gunter Grass, Boris Pasternak, R.D. Laing—there have not been many joke books. Jacqueline Susann would have trouble getting her phone calls returned.

Pantheon, until recently, was known as a publisher that rocked along, earning more respect in most years than profit. Last year, however, it lost \$2 million to \$3 million, according to some accounts. The reasons for this loss are not simple. Some say it's because the corporate owners wanted Pantheon to look like a loser for business reasons. Some, like conservative George F. Will, suggest the house lost money because it published liberals.

Others said the publisher of Pantheon guessed wrong when he thought Americans yearned to read an autobiography by Dr. Spock, the man who raised about two generations of Americans. Deemed by some booksellers as too serious, Spock hit the market like a wet diaper.

At Random House, which is worth about \$800 million and which owns Pantheon, a \$3 million mistake would barely give an editor heartburn. But for \$20 million Pantheon, it's big money.

Pantheon's troubles broke into the news this month when Andre Schiffrin, its managing director, resigned after 28 years. Schiffrin, who undoubtedly has some kind of agreement that the sanctity of his retirement fund depends on silence, has issued only a very general statement.

"I cannot describe in detail the conversations I had with Random House management over the past weeks relating to my departure from Pantheon," he said at one point. "I think it must be clear to everyone, however, that I would not walk away from my life's work if there had not been very profound differences in the approaches to Pantheon's future."

Schiffirin's departure stunned the publishing community. Six of Pantheon's top editors resigned in protest. Writers protested outside Random House. Publishers Weekly called it "a sad day" and added that it "cannot help but appall anyone who believes in book publishing as ultimately something more than a plain act of commerce."

Of course, publishing is commerce, after all, and as another publisher of worthy books told the New York Times recently: "At the end of the day, there has to be enough left to publish again tomorrow." Moreover, the new head of Pantheon has promised to continue to publish worthy books. "It is my intent not to change the editorial orientation of Pantheon," said new publisher Fred Jordan.

But editors in New York say that they hear the sound of profit—Tartars coming over the hill. And they believe that in the constant war between money and excellence, the men with the calculators are winning.

Last year's best-sellers make it clear why Pantheon's owners might want the company to shed its earth shoes and start showing a little leg. The top ten non-fiction best-sellers in 1989, according to Publishers Weekly, told readers how to get rich, how to cook an instant gourmet meal or what it was like to be Jackie Kennedy or Nancy Reagan. Number one was a book called "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" by Robert Fulghum, which may also tell all you really need to know about what sells books. It sold 902,000 copies.

Pantheon had not one single book in the top ten. Nor in the top 20. Its titles for 1989 explain why. They included Barbara Ehrenreich's "Fear of Falling; the Inner Life of the Middle Class." Ian Gibson's biography of Federico Garcia Lorca earned ecstatic reviews. "It earned respect, but not much profit," said one Pantheon person. "I guess that's what we're famous for."

The New York Times Book Review section for March 25 reinforced that fame. The book with the coveted top billing on the front page of the section is a first novel by an unknown writer named Jessica Hagedorn. It is called "Dogeaters," and it is being published by Pantheon this spring.

The reviewer calls it "a rich small feast of a book"—a feast that might have been considered inedible by other publishing houses in Manhattan's crazy publishing world.

Years ago when Pantheon was established, the owners named it after the Roman temple designed to worship all the gods. Readers deserve to wonder if it will be renamed to commemorate the one god who reigns with increasing vigor in the publishing world. Good-bye Pantheon Books. Hello Bottom-Line Publishing.

March, 1990

Japan's Fiction Turns a Page

ELISABETH BUMILLER

Amy Yamada, one of Japan's brightest young literary stars whose sexually explicit prose makes Tama Janowitz read like "Mary Poppins," opens her door with the look of someone who was up all night and liked it. "I love clubs," sighs the recipient of Japan's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize and the author of such works as "Bedtime Eyes" and "Kneel Down and Lick My Feet," a novel based on Yamada's two months of employment at a Tokyo S&M club. "There was a one-week training required," she says a little later, deadpan. "I had to learn how to tie up people without killing them."

Yamada languidly leads the way into her cramped apartment, provided free by the U.S. military for her husband, an Air Force sergeant at the base nearby; he is black, a fact that has fascinated the Japanese, of which more later. Yamada takes a seat cross-legged on the floor. "I went to bed at 6 a.m. and got up at noon," she says. "That's fairly typical for me." Now, at 2 p.m., she is easing agreeably into the day with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of Chianti in the other. She is 32, husky-voiced and barefoot, in black leggings and a man's white shirt, with a tousled, sensuous mop of hair framing—what else to call them?—bedtime eyes. In fact, they're tired eyes. Despite the look of decadence, Yamada confesses the real reason she was up all night was to finish reading a book under consideration for a big literary prize. Respectability does have its price. The former S&M queen, who in 1987 won the Naoki Prize, Japan's equivalent of the Pulitzer, for her novel "Soul Music Lovers Only," now sits on the awards panel as a judge.

Now Yamada's work is available for one of the first times in English, in "Monkey Brain Sushi: New Tastes in Japanese Fiction," an anthology of some of Japan's best contemporary writers. Published by Kodansha International, the collection came out in U.S. bookstores last month. Alfred Birnbaum, the book's editor and one of its translators, calls the selected works "neither ponderous tomes nor throwaway pulp," but "popular writing fresh from the cultural chopping block."

The collected authors are a kind of Japanese Brat Pack, mesmerized by the music and icons of 1960s America, a group, in the words of Birnbaum, to whom "prewar Japan might as well be fiction—a period piece on TV." Their specialty is the minimalist personal narrative, short on a political or social message but long on urban alienation and references to Western brand name goods. Their audience is Japan's postwar, under-40 generation, chiefly female university students and office workers, who buy the books in phenomenal numbers. Haruki Murakami, the most

popular writer of the 1980s, sold 2 million copies of his novel "Norwegian Wood," a phlegmatic love story about a 1960s college student and a clinically depressed young woman.

Not surprisingly, Japan's grand old masters dismiss the new fiction as junk. Kenzaburo Oe, one of Japan's most important postwar writers, has called Murakami's work "an exceedingly self-conscious representation of contemporary cultural habits" and his casual, American-influenced writing style "not really Japanese." Donald Keene, one of the preeminent American critics of Japanese literature, will only say of Murakami that "I think he's a successful writer. I don't think he's trying to do anything new or exciting."

Defenders of the Brat Pack say the writing is fresh, and for better or worse reflects the pop culture of Japan in the 1990s. At the least, it exposes Americans to authors who are on the bestseller lists right now, expanding Japanese writing as it is known in the West beyond the work of Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata or Junichiro Tanizaki—great literature that for all its enduring, universal appeal is still set in the Japan of the old nobility, arranged marriages and moon viewing on crisp autumn nights.

"These are people of the old world," says Yamada. "I want to send a message about the nontraditional parts of Japan. I want to show that there is no big difference between Americans and the Japanese. It is true that each individual is shaped by his culture, but at their core, in their animal part, people are basically the same."

An interesting observation, considering that Yamada's contribution to "Monkey Brain Sushi" is the first chapter of "Kneel Down and Lick My Feet," which takes place at the Queen's Palace, an S&M club where men pay to become terrorized slaves to the women who work there. Or in the words of Shinobu, the street-wise "queen" and narrator: "It's a club for guys who want to get picked on. We don't get many misguided souls who want to tie up women or anything silly like that. So I feel safe. Even someone like me who doesn't really get off on S&M can have a good time. Show me another place where women have slaves in this day and age! Show me another job where you can abuse men and have them thank you for it."

That kind of prose has earned Yamada a reputation as one of Japan's most liberated woman writers. Certainly she is one of the first to break away from the tradition of women's writing as emotional and sentimental—"wet" writing in the terminology of the Japanese, compared with the "dry" writing of analysis and logic traditionally reserved for men. Today, Japanese bookstores still separate almost all women writers into a women's section, but Yamada has broken away with bestsellers that bookstore owners display on the same front tables as those written by men. Birnbaum, who selected Yamada's S&M chapter for the anthology, says he did so partly to challenge expectations in the West about Japanese women.

"It's not that I was particularly looking for something to shock," he says, "but rather for something that was different. It's a nice big laugh at the men, and reflects how trivial they are."

Or as Shinobu tells us:

Let me see—what was it Mr. Yamamoto liked? Oh, I remember, he's the old coot who always takes the full course, hard . . . I sit on the red velvet throne with my legs crossed. Stark naked, [Yamamoto] approaches. He sits at my feet. He sure does look like a slave. In real life, the guy is president of a big company and spends his time bullying employees . . .

"Queen Shinobu, it is an honor to be your humble plaything today."

"You are a despicable little slave."

"Absolutely, your Highness."

At this point, if the answer is unsuitable, I kick the slave away and shriek, "What kind of an answer is that!"

Virtually nothing else in the chapter is suitable for printing in *The Washington Post*. Men will find it intensely uncomfortable to read through to the end.

Yamada knows the chapter is outrageous, but she wants to make an impression on the West. "I've always dreamed that my work would be translated into English so Americans could read it," she says. "I'm so happy." Japan, for all its economic might and disdain for what it sees as the decline of America, still looks to the United States for cultural approval. When "A Wild Sheep Chase," Haruki Murakami's 1982 novel, was published last year in the United States, it set off a whole new flurry of press attention in Japan. In the current anthology, Murakami's "TV People" is advertised on the jacket of the books sold in Japan as having first appeared in the *New Yorker*. "It's a reverse importation effect," says Birnbaum. "Being published in the United States is more than just an extra star on your lapel. It's a new jacket."

Yamada, who grew up all over Japan as the daughter of a respectable, constantly transferred Japanese salariman, or company employee, went to work at the Tokyo S&M Club—called Queen in real life, near the famous sleaze pits of Shinjuku—because she was drawn to the city's underbelly and needed the money. Like Chika, the (relative) ingenue in the book, Yamada was at first repulsed by what she saw. "I was speechless," she says. "But then I became accustomed to it, and could talk about it the same way you'd talk about eating rice at lunch. Actual sexual intercourse was prohibited. There were professionals there who I really admired. Compared to them, I was an amateur." And like Chika, who writes in her off hours, Yamada quit work at the club after she won the Bungei Prize, a major award for young writers.

Queen, Yamada says, is "a very old and traditional" S&M club approved by the police; she says there are about five others like it in Tokyo, and about 100 that are not approved.

"People consider S&M clubs very abnormal," she says. "But I want to say that maybe the other life, the one that people think is normal—maybe that's abnormal." Or as Shinobu relates: "When you get right down to it, there are an awful lot of sadists and masochists in the world. People call this a perversion, but you have to wonder, if there are this many so-called perverts in the world, what is normal?"