

The Ascent of Media by Roger Parry – review

Roger Parry's scholarly journey through the history of media contains important lessons for today's digital pioneers.



• **Peter Preston** *TheObserver* Sunday 18 December 2011

At first glance, this seems just another media studies textbook for first year students to put on their shelves (while Michael Gove purses his lips and peddles ancient Greek instead). Bags of instant facts about TV, radio, newspapers and the rest; handy theses to build essays around; a commodious index, an easy Christmas present. Who could ask for anything more? Yet look closer, for Roger Parry has given us much, much more.

His ascent begins with Aristotle's definition of an ideal size of city – one where news can travel fast. We meet Daniel Defoe and the great pamphleteers starting something irresistible. We sup coffee, gossip and sedition in old Fleet Street. We see, in sum, how everything connects over centuries.

It's a vital emphasis. Most journalists, digital discoverers enmeshed in a world of change, don't think about the past at all. They're too worried about the day after tomorrow. They don't look for the lessons of history. Yet history, in so many ways, is what defines them.

Many seminars in these early Leveson days have inquired how "trust in the press can be restored". But no one pauses to ask when exactly such fabled trust existed. While Lord Northcliffe was conniving to bring governments down? When his brother Harold took over the *Daily Mail* and cried "Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"? As Cecil King plotted a coup against Harold Wilson?

It's fair enough to be hacked off about Rupert Murdoch, but pretty odd to forget what came before – Zinoviev letters, overt political scheming, bizarre ambitions, distortions that ran straight on from the wild explosion of competition in the first four decades of the 20th century. Maybe, in fact, it was left to Lord Reith and a much later succession of BBC opinion polls to invent the concept of "trust" that transfixes current debate. It certainly didn't cross the Atlantic, courtesy of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer: they asked Northcliffe to pop over and give them some yellow tips.

Roger Parry is a wise, experienced media operator and observer. His range is wide – across books, comics, radio, movies, video games, theatre and more – with eclectic taste and a gift for detail. But one theme, essentially, covers all. He perceives a public hunger for information, entertainment, and shared experience growing invention by invention, device by device: he extrapolates Aristotle's city on a global scale. He stresses ways as well as means. Were Defoe and mates the first bloggers? Were the random collection of contributors who compiled the earliest news sheets really citizen journalists? He binds evolving society and accelerating communication together. He seems to see the whole picture.

Within that frame, many things become clearer. Examine, for instance, how theatre, cinema and TV – which each, in their time, appeared certain to supplant the medium that had gone before – are still going strong: theatre with less mass appeal but retaining a powerful niche market, movies breaking box-office records, TV mushrooming across cables and satellites and infinite in variety. Everything adjusts; everything fits. See how video games teach us "the power of active involvement and two-way communication". Yes, "traditional media have a remarkable ability to adapt and survive".

Parry knows that "a thousand years into the future, assuming the asteroids keep missing us... human beings will be reading books". Individual formats "have a robust longevity... Each medium has its golden age: it booms and declines, but it never disappears entirely."

Riepl's law, laid down nearly a century ago by the editor of the *Nürnberg Zeitung*, insists that "newly invented media do not replace old ones but simply converge with them, so that traditional forms become used in different ways". Which is, perhaps, why the ascent goes on, via convergence and accretion.

Where does that leave us further down time's track as iPhone 4 becomes iPhone 14 and Kindle Fires become Kindle Volcanoes? Well, remember how the king of France in the 1500s tried to regulate his publishers and watched impotently as they moved to the Netherlands instead: you can't dragoon a worldwide web. Observe how the English copyright laws of 1710 – the laws of intellectual property – have become dysfunctional, a barrier to innovation. Note (with Professor Clay Shirky) that the printing press of 1400 was dominated by erotica that scientific journals only came along 150 years later. Never forget that cinema started as "what the butler saw" on fairgrounds, that the gramophone was constructed for office dictation, not music: that everything changes.

Remember, in short, how the initial phases of media revolution always delude. Today, perhaps, we can start to discern a settling down, the beginnings of web maturity as economics, politics and technology edge painfully into line. No more free quality content – "there is simply not enough quality advertising to pay for it and friction-free charging mechanisms are essential". No more "unmanageable" torrents of content – "we need curators". No more non-differentiated pricing for usage and service – because bandwidth doesn't come free. And no sweeping certainties either – because certainty is a foolish counsellor.

So the road ahead opens up and the impact of social change and "robust economic models" starts to be felt. So we can finally begin to get a handle on a future that, in essence if not in precise physical form, our children's children will recognise 50 years hence. And Parry's textbook? That may be back of the shelf by then, a trifle dusty, a little less reached for: but still read for its scholarship and plain old-fashioned common sense by students of life itself.

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