

Sleeping Through the Pirate Raid

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The mainstream media was never true to its pretension of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable—which was Gilded Age humorist Finley Peter Dunne’s point—but there were exceptions, and exceptional practices. “Accountability reporting,” or investigative reporting, is one of them.

That’s journalism’s in-house state-of-the-art term for writing—including business writing— that goes deep, asks hard questions, examines systems as well as individuals, and, in its purest form, is not just descriptive and true, but subversive of existing power relations. Always the runt in a world of moneyed press giants then and Earth-straddling corporate media now, investigative journalism is shrinking further. Despite this year’s Pulitzer for Investigative Reporting going to Chris Hamby of The Center for Public Integrity for his riveting exposé of Appalachian miners denied healthcare benefits by Johns Hopkins doctors under the sway and pay of the energy industry, the predominant form of news writing isn’t investigative.

What sadly predominates is incremental, contextless, and moralistic where it should be cumulative, historical, and moral. It’s “access reporting,” which in most mainstream-media business coverage—with such notable and singular exceptions today as the *New York Times’* Gretchen Morgenson—is little more than insider market-messaging for investors and the tops of the business class. At its worst it’s rewritten press releases, mergers and acquisitions horse-race results, and stock quotes for market junkies. It’s the Gog to investigative reporting’s Magog.

Dean Starkman, a longtime *Wall Street Journal* writer and now a Columbia University J-School prof, does a huge public service in his richly detailed and highly readable *The Watchdog That Didn’t Bark: The Financial Crisis and the Disappearance of Investigative Journalism* in teasing out what little was good about mainstream press practice. While his scope is on established institutions—he pays too little attention to outside voices such as the socialist, labor, foreign-language, or underground press— he knows there were enough examples of solid reporting to make his counterintuitive case that the media has and can do better.

Among those few who did were the Muckrakers, including Ida Tarbell, whose classic *The History of the Standard Oil Company* didn’t castigate the Rockefeller mega-empire for being huge and financially bloated; she wasn’t a socialist and didn’t see corporate culture and structure as inherently depraved or destructive. What she faulted the senior Rockefeller and his business-plutocrat compadres for was acting like Barbary pirates.

There’s also Bernard Kilgore, the quondam *Wall Street Journal* editor and Starkman mentor-of-sorts who, despite the rampant ideological mendacity of its editorial pages, “brought storytelling, narrative, in-depth reporting and investigations to financial news and, in doing so, revolutionized both it and American newspapers in general.” He also has kind words for Drew Pearson, I.F. Stone, Michael Harrington, Rachel Carson, Ralph Nader (though the last three were sizably book writers), and others.

Conversely Starkman blames much writing now as then for its lopsided prizing of elite over dissident sources, for a sycophantic management bias, for targeting investors rather than the broad public as its audience, for decontextualizing facts, and for putting the quantity of scoop reporting ahead of quality work. Now it’s all prizing institutional over insurgent sources and scoop reporting over long-form analysis. In short, it’s prizing profiling over probing and in effect sanctifying greed as

normative.

This shift toward “greed is good” as an ideological trope (the phrase comes from Michael Douglas’s character in the Hollywood film *Wall Street*, along with the less-well-remembered but remarkably prescient, “The most valuable commodity I know of is information,”) accelerated after the introduction of CNBC in 1989 and an almost endless supply of websites for the 24/7 news era. The *New York Times Deal Book*, launched in 2001 and honchoed by Adam Ross Sorkin, who got his break as a Timesman at age 22 reporting on mergers and acquisitions, was itself an insiders’ e-newsletter.

Sorkin is a poster boy for the we-don’t-probe genre. *Too Big to Fail*, his best-selling 2009 post-mortem on the 2008 economic crash he never saw coming, is so centered on the doings at the executive-suite level that, says Starkman, he “steadfastly declines to look beyond the months leading up to the crash, so readers are left without the context to understand that nearly every individual named in the book played significant roles in causing the crisis.”

Probing would have exposed the thievery of the mortgage-lending big bankers and hedge fund yuppies, while profiling turned superannuated frat-boy towel snappers into cultural icons. To stretch the metaphor, if business journalism were a dog show, the favored animal would be the French bulldog, not the Rottweiler. Even the St. Bernard would be left out in the snow. How the profession and its handlers missed the biggest cases of corporate misfeasance since the Great Depression is Starkman’s story. Read it!

One outcome of the press’s business-enabling reporting is losing any coherent understanding of the dangers in the growing gap in wealth, income, and political power. Former *Rolling Stone* contributing editor Matt Taibbi’s *The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap*, vividly exposes the pattern of elite water-carrying by the American justice system that Starkman demonstrates is business as usual for the media. And that’s irrespective of which of the two parties controls Congress and the White House. (Remember President Obama’s insistence that Wall Street tycoons “broke no laws” in crashing the economy.)

Taibbi starts with a fair question: why, when poverty rates rise and crime declines, did the prison population correspondingly explode. He then looks at how history’s greatest single plundering of wealth—the knowing and repeated sale of toxic, subprime-mortgage-based securities by the biggest banks to pension funds and municipalities—led only to a flurry of civil trials but not to criminal prosecutions. He contrasts that to the routine, extreme brutality of police toward inner-city residents and the disregard for the humanity of undocumented workers in ICE sweeps and routine traffic stops. Why are single mothers living on public assistance jailed for minor drug offenses when corporate looters who in one case were money launderers for a Mexican drug cartel still operate? Why does the alien crossing the street and picked up in a random stop have less right to counsel and bail than would an accused axe murderer with papers who is suspected of bloodying a meeting of Rotarians? Why does a fair jumper at 125th Street get punished for breaking a municipal law while a bank that breaks fifty state laws receives a financial slap on the wrist?

Taibbi’s reporting, most of it original, is superb and alarmingly descriptive—even this hardened Marxist reviewer was struck by the casualness with which brutality is routinely administered in everyday life—though I’m not satisfied with Taibbi’s answers. Yes, he makes the case that the rich are advantaged in hiring a string of \$1,000-per-hour legal help to frustrate even the most committed prosecutors. Yes, the Securities and Exchange Commission is derelict to a degree that makes Mr. Bean look like Mr. Spock. Yes, key Wall Street financiers move through government circles like extended, in-bred family at a July 4 picnic. Yes, the Bush and Obama administrations’ concerns with the suspected collateral damage if corporate leaders were made to pay for their crimes (a largess not extended to one tiny Chinatown bank, he notes) is gutless and itself destructive. Yes, police in

major cities are held accountable and their budgets padded not by maintaining low crime rates but by meeting arrest quotas and working the media. All true, and his reporting on it is must reading. The big question is: why is it tolerated? Why, as Robert Tressell asked more than a hundred years ago in his classic *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, do even working people spit on those they consider beneath them even as they ape their betters and vote for their candidates?

Throughout the book Taibbi refers to such insidiously disproportionate behavior as insane and racist (which it is), and to its effects as likely to spread to the so-called middle class as the wealth and power divide widens (ditto), but he spends almost no time investigating why the culture so deeply supports and even applauds such blatant discrimination, the scapegoating of “losers and the fronting for the powerful.” And just when you think he will (racism, though not white supremacy—they’re not synonyms—is given some credence as a cultural constant) he lards on one more excruciating but true story of blatant abuses. Taibbi’s case for a dominant culture that brutalizes the poor and lionizes the powerful is unshakeable. Why it persists and what can be done to challenge it isn’t part of his book’s mandate. But it is ours.

Editors’ note: In the print version of this article, several lines of text were misplaced. The version above is corrected. We regret the error.