BOOK REVIEW

THE POWERS THAT BE

By David Halberstam

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A Review By
Frank Zingrone, York University

It is a basic law of communication theory that information is a measure of what you do say set against what you could have said. It takes special abilities in pattern recognition to make such a measurement. The general public is almost never informed through such patterning: news events are presented as discrete units, for the most part unrelated to any on-going processes. We are to take what we get in the carefully selected forms of presentation agreed upon by the manager of public consciousness. The structure of the news is the architecture of ideology, often the seamly motivated personal ideologies of money and power held by the owners of the most massively extended organs of public information.

David Halberstam's The Powers That Be is ex post facto exposé, letting us in on the baroque decision-making patterns that have resulted finally in what we have come to think of as news. It's all quite 'after-the-fact,' will upset only those who have been naive in their understanding of how the news is manufactured, and suggests little that can be done to restrain the unbridled power of the media giants: William Paley, head of CBS, the Chandler dynasty of the Los Angeles Times, Katherine Graham of the Washington Post, the Ochs-Sulzberger people behind the New York Times, and the heirs to the Henry (Harry) Luce Time/Life/Fortune empire.

This book is as detailed as a soap opera and as mollifying, but it does have several virtues. As a lengthy but late look behind the scenes of the past half century or so of news empire-building, the book has a vaguely therapeutic effect in exonerating the Cassandras who knew from the beginning what Halberstam is here revealing belatedly.
For many of us Time magazine's systematic skewing of political reality is not news, nor is the revelation that the venality of most newspapers has prohibited their publishing anything that might go against their commercial interests. And it was cool comfort to us seeing from the beginning the puerile greed and intellectual penury of the unassailable television networks.

This small, pervasive, and sometimes carping group of dissident watchdogs, sceptical of the patterns of reality emerging from the mass media are now absolved of the crime of premature insight. Finally the cataracts are peeled from the dimmed organs of public vision but it all feels as anticlimatic as the vague confirmation of conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination announced recently to a careless public in the obfuscating language of a government committee. One is left too long for journalists who would take such risks while the news is fresh, while something can be done to pull the fulcrum from the levers of power. Well, some try, Halberstam shows us, but too often they are running scared and easily silenced. Policy is made at the top. One wonders if there shouldn't be a Nuremberg principle in journalism.

The Powers That Be is entertaining, in a ghoulish way, allowing the reader to poke into the more atrophied niches of the dead horse that Halberstam is flogging. We gain a sense of being made privy to a complex pathology, the disease of the fourth estate that sets its instincts for survival against the truthful coverage of the news.

Halberstam's tone is always measured and fair. The only person he damns outright, Paley of CBS, he kills by simply revealing Paley's own mortal venality coupled with his extended power to subvert intelligence in public media.

Bill Paley was right at the center of the era's most powerful forces, he had combined the prime energies of American huckstering with the explosive new potential of American technology . . . . It was his decisions which created broadcasting as it exists today, with the power and tastemaking centralized in the network . . . . If his own personal taste happened, as it did, to be exquisite, he never confused his taste or that of his silky friends with that of the larger audience. He was very simply a genius at mass entertainment (p. 24).
Fatally, the image emerges of a Paley grim with money lust, almost an ogre of greed, the humourless purveyor of tasteless trivia, master manipulator of America's id, Paley pulling the strings on the public puppet forcing it into grotesque contortions of mind and spirit for profit and power. The reader is bound to wince at discovering the archhuckster, the disembodied Barker luring us into the sideshow of commercial television, this deliberate sceptic piling up multiple millions following Mencken's dictum that no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people. Once inside Paley's freak show we were loath to admit that it was a Hall of Mirrors. In the case of CBS Halberstam clearly points a finger of guilt, for Paley and the few men like him were dangerous.

As Truman Capote once said of Paley "he looks like a man who has just swallowed an entire human being" (p. 30). His awesome power over men and events transcended even political power. "And unlike Presidents who were often rich and powerful, his power remained, they came and went" (p. 30). Presidents and their minions feared this power of media moguls, and in turn, the desire to secure profits by remaining uncontroverted made the newsmakers vulnerable to the whitewash and the half-truth.

Henry Luce was 'Harry' to everyone who knew him. This ironic informality covered the sad truth that Luce had hardly any friends, was an outsider by nature, cold, calculating, arrogant and at times cloddish as witness the time he entered a haute cuisine French restaurant and asked the maitre d'hôtel: "Got anything good to eat here?" No fuss, no muss, the simple naked power to overwhelm any was his. "He was a big man, little ideas and little concepts and little men did not interest him; he was always in search of giants. He was ever restless, ever dissatisfied, he was not a man of inner peace. He was fascinated by men; men, not the great rhythms of history or economics, were the key to the past and he was a big man himself" (p. 46).

He was mesmerized by power, not money, and curiously he had little interest in radio and television though he was at the centre of the media world. Overall Luce's faith in his Republicanism and his Presbyterianism were inseparable. An unabashed patriot, his wars were holy wars. He held absolute control over every word that went into Time and it was not unusual for a reporter's story to come out completely reversed in point and tone. This was particularly true in the
long battle Luce had with Theodore (Teddy) White, his China correspondent who was trying desperately to expose Chiang as an incompetent fool against Luce's irrational support of that corrupt regime which had something to do with the mysterious feelings which went back to Luce's formative years in China as a missionary's son. Still, such was his power that no president crossed him and Luce's China obsession became U.S. foreign policy from 1946 on. It seems clear that had Luce not had his way on China through his endless attempts to engineer public opinion to his ends, thus making us ignorant and frozen to understanding the forces of change in the orient, we might have been spared two terribly bloody wars, Korea and Vietnam. We were in this case, as in so many others, grievously deceived.

The Luce publications were among the worst deceivers and they were not above punishing those who had been right. For it was the fall of China and the trauma that fall produced here (loveable, friendly, subservient Christian China turning overnight into 600,000,000 angry hostile Communist Chinese) that led squarely to the excesses of the McCarthy period (p. 86).

The breakdown of public gullibility under the stresses of Vietnam and Watergate makes it difficult to remember how trusted the major organs of news were in this slightly more innocent time of cold war certainties. For major politicians, control of public opinion came through the benefices of men like Luce and Paley and the Chandlers of Los Angeles. No one dared to provoke their wrath if his public survival was an issue.

Powers is a book within a book. Beneath the surface story of the rise of journalism and its imperial figures we are actually witnessing the dethronement of 'print journalism' by television news. This change constitutes a radical restructuring of the content of the American psyche by a new form. Ever since the Kennedy/Nixon debates of 1960 the instantaneous power of television was seen as a sine qua non for the serious politician. The power to inform with simple, cogent ideas, in fact, to manipulate millions in a moment to a single view brought the American people to the T.V. screen seeking a glimpse of the image of truth. Analysis of issues began to wane as a concern of the electorate. If in some situations a picture was worth a thousand words, no one noticed that the image also pre-empts depth understanding.
The problem of selection alone made T.V. news a travesty. The world? In film clips? In ten minutes? Absurd! Few noticed the absurdity. Even when those within T.V. news bemoaned this inadequacy publicly, their warnings went unheeded. We are left with the appalling certainty that the people want only to be spared understanding, or at best to be just dimly informed. And yet so powerful is television that, according to Halberstam, President Johnson made his decision to leave the White House when Walter Cronkite finally went against his Vietnam policy. With Cronkite gone Johnson knew that he had lost the centre because Cronkite was the centre personified, a paternal figure who was, according to the polls, the most trusted man in America. No one could contravene Cronkite's implacable centrality and expect mass public support, for any issue, let alone an unpopular war.

A paradigm example of the flagging power of print journalism came out of the 1967 return of "The New Nixon" to public life. This event was marked by an awkwardly effusive Nixon appearing to embrace the very group whom he had castigated ("You won't have Nixon to kick around any more") in his embarrassingly paranoid swan song after his unsuccessful run for the governorship of California against Jerry Brown's father. Many journalists thought that Nixon had finally learned his lesson, that his new approach was a true change in a man who had always been secretive and withdrawn.

This smiling accessible darkhorse did well in his print coverage, so well in fact that it soon became clear that he would get the Republican nomination. At that moment "The New Nixon" disappeared. The print people were cut off succinctly and Nixon shifted to television with the most stage managed performance package ever mounted by a politician. He demanded complete control of his image and he got it. The young man hand-picked by Nixon himself to do the job privately thought that Nixon was the worst media subject he had ever encountered. The kingmakers had their hands full but Nixon won with an unprecedented landslide. The power of television to do the whole job has never been doubted since.

The Chandler dynasty was founded on an astute act of economic violence: the rape of the Owens Valley water supply by General Harrison Gray Otis owner of the Los Angeles Times, a man possessed of the mystique and choleric zealousness for money-making.
In a brilliantly subversive land grab in the Nile-lush valley some 240 laughably long miles northeast of Los Angeles, Otis and his new partner and son-in-law Harry Chandler, diverted the copious overflow of the valley river down to L.A. where the precarious balance between available water and the growth of the city had stalemated development.

 Manipulating key municipal officials, the city was whispered into a bond issue to pay for the donkey work of retrieving the water while Otis and Chandler devoted themselves to the purchase of critically located parcels of land. Halberstam claims that in this first phase of harvesting their newly watered crop of real estate Otis and Chandler turned a three million dollar investment into at least one hundred and twenty million. Such a bumper crop brought in even the most demure investors who supplied an endless stream of capital for the land boom which forced Los Angeles to build out into its infamous pattern of urban sprawl in order to meet O-C held land masses.

 They made the city, became its ruling elite and they told it what to think through their golden goose, The Los Angeles Times, a fifth-rate newspaper but one which knew how to promulgate the tenacious myth of the golden frontier.

 Previously the Times trust had been unscrupulous in petty ways. On more than one occasion Chandler had arranged to alienate the subscribers of the rival and more widely circulated Tribune by having the Trib newsboys attend a picnic which became prolonged by his plan so that the boys didn't return to the city in time to get the paper out.

 When the virus of unionism began to infect his employees, the Times plant mysteriously erupted in a series of explosions that shook the city. Otis was said to be away, but quickly returned to an auxiliary plant which had been set up by his son-in-law, and wrote the following in an editorial.

 O you anarchic scum, you cowardly murderers, you leeches upon honest labor, you midnight assassins, you whose hands are dripping with the innocent blood of your victims, you against whom the wails of poor widows and the cries of fatherless children are ascending to the Great White Throne, go, mingle with the crowd on the street corners, look upon the crumbled and blackened walls, look at the ruins wherein are buried the calcined remains of those whom you murdered ... (p. 110).
The evidence is thin and contradictory and Halberstam makes no charges but follows with this:

Later, when Clarence Darrow was about to take on the defense of the two men accused of dynamiting the plant, he was shown the editorial. "But how could anyone make those charges when the firemen were still poking around in the ruins and no one could have known what caused the explosion?" (p. 110).

Harry Chandler detested violence of this type, and soon he had the paper under his control, with the General, fuming till the end expiring on a back burner.

The Los Angeles Times was a bad newspaper used simply as an instrument of leverage for Chandler's plans of dynastic business expansion.

The paper had no particular philosophy or hidden platform; it stood simply as a blunt instrument for overpowering all opposition to Chandler's will. The special rights of the elite rising out of property interests and boot loops for the masses to pick themselves up by seemed the main occupations of its editors and licksplitting Chandlerettes who passed for reporters on this paper. No one of independent mind worked for the L.A. Times.

When Upton Sinclair began to get press for his radical political movement, in fact nothing more insidious than middle of the road socialism, Chandler destroyed Sinclair through Kyle Palmer, perhaps the most powerful man in California after Chandler, and senior editor of the Times, by mustering the formidable talents of Hollywood to produce "fake newsreels" which ran as news in every theatre in the state, showing hords of bums waiting to cross the border into California. Another of these pioneer 'mini-docs' (messages from special interest groups assimilated into news shows purporting to be straight news) showed a Bolshevik-looking wild man who was going to vote for Sinclair. When asked why, he replied, "Vell, his system voked vell in Rooshia, vy can't it vork here?" (p. 117). Ironically it was this news fantasy factory, and Kyle Palmer in particular, that invented Richard Nixon and groomed him for the White House.

He was the incandescent man, Phil Graham walked into a room and took it over, charming and seducing whomever he wished, men and women alike. No one in Washington
could match him at it, not even . . . John F. Kennedy. He was handsome and slim and when he smiled . . . everything stopped. He was the Sun King. (p. 158)

Halberstam's portrait of the charismatic owner of The Washington Post is adulating. This for him is a man made for bronze. On the face of it Graham seems adequately larger than life to justify such regalizing description, but he was also a deeply Damoclean figure feasting on life under the fine wire of his own nerve, racing with matchless acceleration toward a precipice.

The hell-bent pace that hardly left time for sleep, ("he seemed to fly higher and faster than anyone else" [p. 158]) is finally the unquieting profile of a manic suicide. Phil Graham wanted to do it all. He might well have become President had he chosen to enter politics. Instead, the Post gave him on-going powers less censured than those of the compromising art and from the vantage of a newspaper publisher he set out to change the course of the nation, even the temper of his times.

He first came to notice as a star at the Harvard Law School. Editor of the prestigious Law Review, he so impressed Professor Henry Hart of Harvard Law that Hart seriously announced that though still a student Graham was ready to be the Law School Dean. Graham's law career began as the stripling protégé of Chief Justice Felix Frankfurter who selected Graham as the most promising of a luminous node of wunderkind law clerks. But this man marked for greatness somehow got into the newspaper business.

Graham's marriage brought him the Post almost against his wishes. Marrying Katherine, the dun-feathered daughter of tycoon Eugene Meyer, seemed a piece ill-cut for the mosaic of the grand career that Graham's friends were waiting for him to delineate. The Post was a floundering enterprise, would and did take all the alchemy of Phil's transformational touch to make a first rate paper of it. The magnum opus took about seventeen years and a good deal of Meyer's gold to achieve. Even then the Post had not reached its avowed objective to be the rival on par with the New York Times.

Graham, essentially a libertarian in his views, was not flawless in his judgments and was one of those who thought that Nixon had real potential after his Hiss/HCUA performances brought him to national attention and Graham even
persisted in defending RMN after the 'Checkers Speech' and Nixon's "moving" defense of his slush fund manipulations.

Still, his overall love of liberty marked Phil Graham as a target for the Right. Once riding in an elevator with Walter Winchell, who was at the time functioning as an extra finger for Senator Joe McCarthy, Graham found Winchell pointing at him and saying, "We're going to get you and we're going to destroy you" (p. 198). Graham learned early on that being a newspaperman with principles was a dangerous business and he knew that with less principle his assets would have increased. At this level of ethnical costs Graham paid his own way.

It was the mania which saved him while it was killing him. For instance, believing in civil rights, Graham was appalled at Eisenhower's foot-dragging during the Little Rock Arkansas school crisis so he moved in like a self-appointed saviour with frenzied activity managing the crisis at a national level.

He was becoming by degrees less irreverent and self-mocking, more obsessed and desperate. Thus torn tragically he threw himself into kingmaking for Kennedy. He became the key broker at the convention, a perfect outlet for his now barely checked manic eruption. With Kennedy in power his own stature grew.

He was also clearly sicker than ever now, the highs were more creative and more brilliant, and the lows more despairing than ever; he was ironically enough, becoming more and more powerful as he was becoming sicker and sicker (p. 315).

In spite of everything his paper was still not first rate, in the sense of being perceived as on par with the New York Times. He had purchased Newsweek and was threatening Luce and everything seemed to be dovetailing to excellence when he was felled by this strength which had now become an irreversible weakness. He died without seeing the Post hit the top. He had set the stage: clearly the special kind of greatness which was his.

Out of the irrational and adulterous behaviour which marked his decline came a steeled woman wronged by his madness: Kay Graham, his quiet, unassuming and all-suffering wife, retiring and shy to a painful degree, stepped
out of his shadow with resolve and clear-sightedness and
astounded the Post people by taking over and it was she who
took the Post the last league home to excellence. It was her
personal decision to go with Watergate. Seen from Halber-
stam's 'inside' vantage even this cliche of political obscenity
takes on new interest.

Perhaps not wanting to foul his own nest, Halberstam,
who worked for The New York Times for six years doing some
of his best reporting for them as foreign correspondent in the
Congo, Poland, and Vietnam, where his pre-Johnson reporting
from 1962-63 won him the Pulitzer Prize, devotes one slim
chapter to his parent paper, not, I think, to exculpate that
paper from the scrutiny of his fault-finding but simply to
suggest that in the Times one meets with the best one could
hope for in standards of excellence.

A little background is developed around Adolph Ochs,
school dropout and boy publisher of the Chattanooga Times, a
"white Jew," ambitious, sensitive, trustworthy, good citizen.
Indirectly the Spanish/American War made the Times. The
Hearst papers were sweeping the market. They moved a
battalion of reporters and photographers by gunboat to Cuba.
"When Frederic Remington the great artist had complained
that there was too little action, Hearst had wired back that
he would supply the war, and Remington would supply the
pictures. They loved a story like this, rich as it was in
blood and flag" (p. 209).

Ochs was floundering, essentially conservative and
lacking a correspondent network; he could not compete with
this sort of news control. In a brilliant stroke he dropped
the price of the Times from three pennies to one. Within a
year his circulation had tripled and there was no looking
back. Emphasizing coverage over all other considerations the
Times soon became the national paper of record. Ochs dream
was realized. In such a position the Times had little trouble
in maintaining the best news staff in the country, including
the legendary Carr Van Anda who had, among other brilliant
feats, caught Einstein in a mistake and was the only man to
calculate accurately enough for a scoop that the Titanic was
in fact sinking in the face of its unsinkability.

In its first days of occupying "the vital center" of print
journalism the Times was said to be "owned by Jews, edited
by Catholics and read by Protestants," (p. 213) an observa-
tion not always offered in good-humoured innocence. Arthur
Hays Sulzburger carried over his father-in-law's sensitivity to the family Jewishness. When the editorship of the editorial page came open in 1937 Arthur Krock thought he had the job. When it was given to someone else a dismayed Krock took his case to Sulzberger. "It's a family enterprise," Sulzberger said, "and it's a Jewish paper and we have a number of Jewish reporters working for us. But in all the years I've been here we have never put a Jew in the showcase." Krock remonstrated with the news that it was his father who was Jewish and that according to biblical law one's mother had to be Jewish for one to be a Jew. "Arthur, how do you know all that if you're not Jewish?" (p. 216) Sulzberger finished. This fear of racial bias may well be just the thing that has made the Times the signal leader in objective reporting. Again one's strength is one's weakness as one's weakness may be made into strength.

There must be a thousand memorable anecdotes in this book, many pithy with the stuff of an era and others illuminating the growth of the communications industry. The parade of names lends glamour and nostalgia to the tale: Cronkite, Murrow, Friendly, Shirer, Lippmann, Clurman, the ones we know, and the others most of them worthy of more attention: Fuerbringer, the promethean rightwing editor of Time, Frank Stanton, Paley's hench-and-hunchman at CBS, Reston, Kintner, Wiggins, Buff and Otis Chandler, Teddy White, Greg Dunne, Charley Mohr and John Hersey "who told Luce that Pravda contained roughly the same amount of truth as Time" (p. 453). The reader gains a sense that this is the full enchiridion of the communications industry, a programme for the big game.

While The Powers That Be is generally pleasant reading it is also clear that Halberstam lacks the virtuosity in style required to sustain a book of such magisterial length, over seven hundred pages. The tone and style of the book remain the same in spite of the publisher's attempt to break it up into smaller more digestible pieces. Halberstam's sentences are often circuitous and a surprising number of them are even ill-formed.

Most embattling of all his syntactical inventions is his habit of stringing together complete sentences, three and four at a time separated only by commas. Though he says that he spent seven years writing this book, it is clear that his copy editor devoted somewhat less time to cleaning up these linguistic distractions.
On balance the book is interesting mainly because it deals with information that anyone interested in communications must have. If urgency can be a subtle feeling there is such a force afoot in this long narrative with its behind-the-scenes intimacy. In the end the book seems more significant than it did in its beginnings because one learns finally that the signal instances of great investigative reporting are by far the exceptions, in fact, it seems almost a miracle that there is any of it. The McCarthy/Army Hearings were broadcast simply to fill schedule vacancies by a floundering ABC network; the Pentagon Papers might not have been released had Ellsberg not been so astute in handling the matter; and even Watergate developed to a point of no return more through a series of fortuitous accidents than brave journalism. At the end one has a sense of having read through a melodrama: the birth, life and times and death of print journalism. One question remains through all of this: how much news is there in a newspaper? The Powers That Be confirms that for the most part newspapers deal in discrete units of historical gossip and that a book like this, even after the facts, is necessary in order to make any sense of the on-going processes that move our society.

NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM: LAW AND POLICY ON CANADIAN COMMUNICATIONS

A three day conference with 450 participants was held in late January at the Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa. The conference centered around legal and public policy questions. Several sessions provided an over-view on many current communications concerns, ranging from pay-TV, to satellites, to videotex, and a well attended and developed mock CRTC hearing. The sessions allowed participants to gather up-to-date information on a wide range of current issues.

There were two major thrusts evident during the symposium, one being the increasing legal aspects of both the CRTC hearings and federal-provincial constitution issues; the other thrust was the vast technological developments in telecommunication systems. The latter array of innovations frequently lead to discussion of the almost impossible task of regulating either broadcasting or telecommunication services in the future.

Yet for all discussion there was little attention paid to the issues such as Canadian content or Canadian sovereignty in future information systems. A continental information system (e.g. pay-TV, computerized data bases etc.) seemed to be assumed by many in the audience rather than a concern about a uniquely Canadian information and broadcasting system.

Tom McPhail, Carleton University