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## **Media Censures: The Hutchins Commission on the Press, the New York Intellectuals on Mass Culture**

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Around the middle of the 20th century, two groups of American intellectuals turned their attention to the mass media. The scholars on the Commission on Freedom of the Press, chaired by University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins, assessed the American news media. Dwight Macdonald and his fellow New York intellectuals assessed the American entertainment media and other forms of mass culture. On the whole, both groups were appalled. Hutchins et al. and Macdonald et al. inhabited different worlds—the intellectual establishment and the intellectual antiestablishment—yet the two groups developed parallel critiques. Comparing them reveals important aspects of the role of midcentury intellectuals, particularly their attitudes toward mass media and mass society, officialdom and power. It also raises provocative questions about the forces that shape research agendas.

*Keywords: media criticism, culture criticism, media responsibility, intellectuals*

In the 1940s, American intellectuals from a wide range of positions focused their attention on the mass media. Under the leadership of University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins, a group of scholars known as the Commission on Freedom of the Press evaluated the news media, while Dwight Macdonald and some other New York intellectuals, as they were later dubbed, evaluated the American entertainment media. On the whole, both groups were appalled.

Hutchins et al. and Macdonald et al. inhabited different worlds—the intellectual establishment and the intellectual antiestablishment—yet the two groups developed parallel critiques of the mass media. The critiques rest on the same approach to research, the same misreading of history, and the same misunderstanding of media effects. Although each group’s commentary is the subject of a substantial literature, the two have almost never been considered together. Tracing the similarities and differences sheds new light on the two groups of intellectuals and their attitudes about mass media, and it raises provocative questions about the forces that shape research agendas.

This article examines the critiques and their authors. The Hutchins Commission’s critique is represented principally by its report, *A Free and Responsible Press* (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947), supplemented by its unpublished memos, background papers, drafts, and deliberations, with a

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focus on the commission's discussion of public affairs journalism. The New York circle's critique is represented principally by articles published between 1941 and 1960 by Dwight Macdonald, supplemented by works of Clement Greenberg, Irving Howe, and a few others.

Admittedly, Macdonald is an imperfect representative of his group. In their mass-culture critiques, he and other New York intellectuals overlapped in some arguments but not others, and at some times but not others. Macdonald was *sui generis*. Leon Trotsky supposedly called him a "Macdonaldist" (Epstein, 2001, p. 27), and Howe remarked on his "table-hopping mind" (Rodden, 2017, p. 49). But Macdonald produced the best-known critique of mass culture, and some New York intellectuals shared his concerns.

Two preliminary points should be made. First, although some scholars (e.g., Gans, 1999) view the news media as a component of mass culture, this article treats the two as distinct, just as the two circles of critics generally did. Second, some New York intellectuals did defend mass culture, at least tepidly (e.g., Hook, 1952). This article concentrates on those who criticized it, particularly Macdonald.

### Literature Review

More than three decades ago, Hilton Kramer (1986) observed that "there appears to be no end" (p. 1) to the outpouring of books and articles on the New York intellectuals. The outpouring continues, with books published in the last decade on the New York intellectuals as Jews (Goffman & Morris, 2009), as commentators on the Cuban revolution (Rojas, 2015), and as targets of FBI surveillance (Rodden, 2017). Major works on the group include books by Ernest Goldstein and Bernard Rosenberg (1982), Alexander Bloom (1986), Terry A. Cooney (1986), Alan M. Wald (1987), Joseph Dorman (2000), and David Laskin (2000). Works on Dwight Macdonald include a biography (Wreszin, 1994), a collection of his letters (Wreszin, 2001), a collection of interviews with him (Wreszin, 2003), a study of his writings in his journal *politics* (Sumner, 1996), and a study of his writings on culture (Lewandowski, 2013). Another important work, whose ambit extends beyond the New York group, is a study of radical intellectuals and popular culture by Paul R. Gorman (1996). In addition, Robert Vanderlan (2010) provides insights into the role of public intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly two who worked for Henry Luce's *Fortune*: Dwight Macdonald and future Commission on Freedom of the Press member Archibald MacLeish.

The Commission on Freedom of the Press is the subject of a smaller literature. Major works relying on original sources include monographs by Margaret A. Blanchard (1977) and Stephen Bates (1995); articles by Stephen Bates (2009), Jerilyn S. McIntyre (1979, 1987), Roger Simpson (1995), and Jane S. McConnell (1997); part of a book by Victor Pickard (2015); a book chapter by Brett Gary (2005); and theses or dissertations by Paul M. Fackler (1982), Susan Dell Gonders Golike (1995), and Frederick Blevens (1995).

Studies of the New York circle of culture critics seldom overlap with studies of the Hutchins assemblage of press critics. Two exceptions are an article by Blevens (1994) and the book chapter by Gary (2005). Blevens considers the Commission on Freedom of the Press in the context of another Hutchins project, the selection and publication of the Great Books of the Western World. He links

Hutchins's efforts to popularize the high culture of the Great Books with his efforts to upgrade the low culture of journalism, and he takes note of Macdonald's attack on the Great Books project. Gary links the mass-culture critique to fears of propaganda-mesmerized masses, and he notes that the Commission on Freedom of the Press in general viewed the public more positively, as discriminating and competent citizens who were ill-served by corporate media.

## **The Two Groups**

### ***Background***

The Commission on Freedom of the Press, often called the Hutchins Commission, grew out of discussions between Time, Inc., editor in chief Henry R. Luce and his friend Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago. Luce offered to fund a study of freedom of the press, and Hutchins agreed to oversee it (Hutchins, 1947). The two men selected a dozen Americans, mostly academics, as members, plus four foreign advisers (McConnell, 1997; McIntyre, 1987). The most active members, in addition to Hutchins, included Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish, philosopher William Ernest Hocking, First Amendment scholar Zechariah Chafee Jr., and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In addition to its general report, the commission published special studies by Hocking (1947), Chafee (1947), and members of the research staff (Inglis, 1947; White, 1947; White & Leigh, 1946). Published in 1947, the general report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, declares that the news media "have not provided a service adequate to the needs of the society" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 1) and that they "must be accountable . . . for meeting the public need" (p. 18). On the whole, the book met with a chilly reception from American journalists, including Luce; but in the years that followed, it entered the canon of media studies as the foundation of the social responsibility theory of journalism (Blanchard, 1977; Rantanen, 2017).

The New York intellectuals were a circle of writers coalesced around small, cerebral magazines, notably *Partisan Review*. Irving Howe conferred the title "New York intellectuals" in 1968; previously they had been called simply "the *Partisan Review* crowd" (Jumonville, 2007, p. 2). Clement Greenberg published the first of the group's critiques of mass culture, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Horizon* in 1940, and Irving Howe published "Notes on Mass Culture" in *politics* in 1948. The most visible mass-culture critic was Dwight Macdonald, who published "A Theory of 'Popular Culture'" in *politics* in 1944 and then revised the argument in "A Theory of Mass Culture," published in *Diogenes* in 1953, and the two-part "Masscult and Midcult," published in *Partisan Review* in 1960.

### ***The Groups Compared***

The two groups share several attributes. First, members of both wrote about a wide range of topics beyond their formal training. Macdonald (1960b) in fact maintained that only "generalists whose ideas are broad and non-professional" can qualify as intellectuals (p. 617). Second, the members of both groups were writers, and some were also editors. Hutchins chaired the editorial committee of the cultural magazine *Measure* (Regnery, 1979), and commission member George Shuster was the former managing editor of *Commonweal* (Van Allen, 1995). The New York intellectuals frequently invented or reinvented

magazines, including *Partisan Review*, *politics*, *Dissent*, *Commentary*, *Public Interest*, and *Encounter*. "When intellectuals can do nothing else, they start a magazine," remarked Howe (1979, p. xiv). Third, although the New York intellectuals focused on culture and the commission on journalism, members of both groups crossed over. Macdonald frequently wrote critically about journalism, especially Time, Inc., where he had worked (e.g., 1937a, 1937b, 1937c, 1938, 1945, 1950, 1957b), and Hutchins played a lead role in selecting classic works for the Great Books of the Western World (Beam, 2008). Fourth, with two exceptions in the case of the Hutchins Commission (Blanchard, 1977), members of both groups kept apart from big business. They thereby stayed true to what Howe (1954) called "the whole idea of the intellectual vocation—the idea of a life dedicated to values that cannot possibly be realized by a commercial civilization" (p. 11). Finally, one Hutchins Commission member was also one of the New York intellectuals, though not a prominent commentator on mass culture: Reinhold Niebuhr.

Though substantial, the features shared by the two groups are outweighed by the differences. To begin with, the Commission on Freedom of the Press was a collaborative undertaking. The 13 commission members unanimously signed *A Free and Responsible Press*, which, as Hutchins noted in the foreword, demanded compromises on tone and phrasing. The result is a sermon that is stern and staid in tone. By contrast, the New York intellectuals' articles on mass culture are distinctly individual productions. In particular, Macdonald's "Masscult and Midcult" is an antic performance, aglow with glee as well as gloom, hardly the sort of thing a committee might produce.

Indeed, the New York intellectuals seem to have been temperamentally disinclined to compromise. They aspired to avoid "the accredited institutions of society" (Howe, 1954, p. 13), and some managed to subsist "in decent poverty from moderately serious literary journalism" (p. 14). Macdonald scraped by as a writer and editor, aided by a modest trust fund and, in the late 1940s, by an unanticipated inheritance of his wife's (Wreszin, 1994). Most members of the Hutchins Commission, by contrast, worked in elite universities.

Perhaps in part because many of them operated outside formal institutions, the New York intellectuals were less prominent than the commission members in the 1930s and 1940s. Macdonald and other members of the New York circle rarely addressed audiences beyond their small magazines (Howe, 1968), though Macdonald did write for *Fortune* in its early years. (Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, he wrote for *The New Yorker* and *Esquire*.) By contrast, Hutchins twice appeared on the cover of *TIME*, and he and other commission members contributed articles to mass-market magazines such as *Life* (a favorite target of Macdonald's attacks on mass culture).

The groups differed in other respects, too. In art, many New York intellectuals favored the avant-garde, whereas Hutchins's Great Books tastes were mainstream. In politics, Macdonald (1972) at one point embraced Trotskyism, though he later called himself "a conservative anarchist" (p. 2). By contrast, most Hutchins Commission members were New Deal liberals when they collaborated on *A Free and Responsible Press*, though some had held radical views earlier, according to Blevens (1995).

Perhaps the most substantial difference between the two groups is their stance toward politics and power. The New York intellectuals stood apart from officialdom as a matter of principle, believing,

according to Howe (1954), that intellectuals "who attach themselves to the seats of power . . . surrender their freedom of expression without gaining any significance as political figures" (p. 13). Most members of the Hutchins Commission, by contrast, had worked in government as advisers or appointees (McIntyre, 1987). Archibald MacLeish served as Librarian of Congress and as the Roosevelt administration spokesman on military preparedness (Donaldson, 1992). John Dickinson ran the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department (Dickinson, 1940). Hutchins accepted a Roosevelt administration job only to have the offer evaporate; he also aspired to be nominated to the Supreme Court (Ashmore, 1989). Whereas Bloom (1986) calls the New York intellectuals "the perfect outsiders" (p. 153), Gary (2005) terms the members of the Hutchins Commission "bookish men of action" (p. 83).

The disagreement over the role of the intellectual came to a head after MacLeish published *The Irresponsibles* in 1940. In the brief tract, MacLeish (1940) characterized fascism as "a revolt against the common culture of the West" (p. 14), and he called on writers and scholars to oppose it with "the weapons of ideas and words" (p. 16). In this time of global crisis, he said, they must abandon their "antiseptic air of objectivity" (p. 34) and their single-minded pursuit of "truth of feeling" (p. 31).

The critic Van Wyck Brooks praised *The Irresponsibles* and said that it might "turn the tide in American literature" (Donaldson, 1992, p. 335). Thereafter, in two speeches and then a book, he distinguished between primary writers and secondary (or "coterie") writers (Nelson, 1981). According to Brooks (1941), primary writers, such as Dostoyevsky and Dickens, address timeless themes and universal feelings in works intended for the masses, whereas secondary writers, such as Joyce and Proust, obsess over form and phrasing in works intended mainly for other secondary writers. Brooks said, quoting Nietzsche, that "literature is not important unless it is a 'stimulus to life'" (p. 200).

In a *Partisan Review* essay titled "Kulturbolschewismus Is Here," Macdonald (1941) charged that Brooks and MacLeish were trying to impose an "official approach to art" (pp. 450–451) that verged on totalitarianism. Treating MacLeish and Brooks together was "a shrewd debater's tactic" on Macdonald's part, writes Vanderlan (2010, p. 131). MacLeish's focus was political. Though he urged writers to join the struggle against fascism, he did not contend that the apolitical writers were producing bad art; in fact, he said that "the time we live in has produced more first-rate writers than any but the very greatest ages" (MacLeish, 1940, p. 27). Brooks, by contrast, advanced a broad aesthetic argument that mentioned fascism only in passing.

Macdonald, ironically, was vulnerable to his own "Kulturbolschewismus" criticism. When Edmund Wilson maintained a public silence on the Brooks theory of literature, Macdonald accused him of shirking "the responsibility of writers on *our* side of the fence to stick their necks out now, to speak out publicly against this sort of thing" (Wreszin, 2001, p. 106). In rallying opposition to MacLeish and Brooks for telling writers what to say, thus, Macdonald himself told a writer what to say.

## **Comparing the Critiques**

### ***Targets and Goals***

Both the Hutchins Commission and the New York circle sought not just to spotlight bad media products but also to explain the historical, social, and economic forces responsible for them. The Hutchins Commission focused on news media and their impact on self-government, whereas Macdonald and other New York intellectuals focused on the arts in general and, more particularly, entertainment media and their impact on culture.

Although the categories overlap—journalism can have artistry, and the arts can affect politics—two distinctions are important. First, news articles report on actual people and events, and they are judged in large part by their accuracy. The arts are measured by other standards. Second, whereas journalism tends to be ephemeral, telling truths about the moment, the arts at their best tell truths that transcend the moment. In the famous phrase of Ezra Pound (1934), “Literature is news that STAYS news” (p. 29).

### ***Research***

In formulating their critiques of the media, both the Commission on Freedom of the Press and Macdonald eschewed extensive research, particularly quantitative research on media content. “The Commission did not conduct elaborate ‘research,’” Hutchins (1947, p. v) wrote, prompting one reviewer to remark that Hutchins seemed to regard *research* as a neologism (Liebling, 1947). Macdonald (1957b) similarly embedded the term “social sciences” in quotation marks (p. 120). He maintained that cultural criticism “can never be ‘statistically verified,’ being a matter of sensibility” (Macdonald, 1957a, p. 81).

Both groups were criticized for neglecting research. “No matter how wise the men are,” Frank Luther Mott (1947, p. 441) wrote in a review of *A Free and Responsible Press*, “if they do not have original, first-hand knowledge of the subject, they cannot report reliably on a complicated, extensive, and vitally important system.” Edward Shils (1957, 1958, 1960) similarly faulted Macdonald and other critics of mass culture for citing no evidence for their assertions.

### ***Historical Narrative***

The two groups constructed overlapping historical narratives, with a golden age shattered by the forces of mass society—historical narratives that scholars deem inaccurate.

For the Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947), the golden age existed around the time of the framing of the First Amendment, an era of “easy individual access to the market place of ideas” (p. 15). During this period, “anybody with anything to say had comparatively little difficulty in getting it published,” because “presses were cheap; the journeyman printer could become a publisher and editor by borrowing the few dollars he needed” (p. 14). But by the early 20th century, only the wealthy could afford the facilities to publish major newspapers, so ownership fell into fewer hands. In addition, “the economic

logic of private enterprise force[d] most units of the mass communications industry to seek an ever larger audience" (p. 52), which prevented in-depth analysis and dissenting viewpoints from reaching the public.

For the New York intellectuals, the golden age began in the 17th century and deteriorated in the 18th and 19th centuries (Macdonald, 1960a). It featured two tiers: the folk culture of the masses and the high culture of the aristocracy. Appreciating high culture required education that the masses lacked, but they took pleasure in folk culture, "an autochthonous product shaped by the people to fit their own needs" (Macdonald, 1960a, p. 214). Then came mass society, with its cluster of social and political disruptions. Industrialization and improved transportation drew people to the cities. Literacy rates increased. In factories, the lives of workers became less arduous but more tedious; inexpensive and formulaic mass culture served to distract them from their "disturbing reduction to semi-robot status" (Howe, 1948, p. 120). As with newspapers, the machinery to manufacture mass culture required a large investment; for the sake of profit, companies maximized the size of the audience (Greenberg, 1940).

According to scholars, both of the golden age narratives are flawed. As for the Hutchins Commission, historians have found that Americans of around 1790 did not have ready access to printing presses; the dominant mass communication media of the era were too expensive for the masses (Roucek & Huszar, 1950). Mott (1947) faulted the commission for a "blind spot" in its "reliance on the mythical 'golden age of journalism'" (p. 443). According to Gorman (1996), Macdonald posited a simplified and romanticized view of folk societies, which originated with the anthropologist Robert Redfield—coincidentally, a member of the Hutchins Commission—but which later was debunked.

### ***The Indictments***

The two groups faulted media offerings on parallel grounds. First, both groups complained about the absence of individualized sensibility. Notwithstanding the institutional prose of the committee-written *A Free and Responsible Press*, MacLeish lamented the "sameness and lack of variety" of wire-service articles (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1946, p. 101). For Macdonald (1960a), mass culture is "a standard product, like Kleenex" (p. 206), "fabricated" (Macdonald, 1953, p. 2) by "efficiency experts and audience-reaction analysts" (p. 17). In this regard, he viewed mass culture as the product of quantitative research, and he rejected quantitative research as a tool for criticizing it; for him, criticism of culture, like culture itself, ought to reflect a distinctive sensibility rather than data-driven sterility. He wrote of "the Academic-Cautious approach," with its "statistical tables and other instruments of pedantic torture" (Wreszin, 2001, p. 277).

Second, both groups rejected the notion that newness signifies importance. Although it might seem difficult to take the *new* out of *news*, the commission tried. One criterion of news, it said, is recentness—"something that has happened within the last few hours" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, pp. 54–55)—which, according to the commission, has the effect of omitting important information. As for works of culture, Howe (1968) and Macdonald (1960a) maintained that novelty does not signify quality. New York intellectual Hannah Arendt, whose theory of mass society influenced Macdonald's critique of mass culture (Gorman, 1996), maintained that "the only nonsocial and authentic

criterion for works of culture is, of course, their relative permanence and even their ultimate immortality" (Arendt, 1960, p. 280).

Third, some members of both groups looked down on media products that could be appreciated without effort. In 1930, Hutchins lamented that the press seemed reluctant to "call forth intellectual effort from the reader" ("Hutchins Suggests Endowed Press," 1930). Clement Greenberg (1940) said that Norman Rockwell "pre-digests art for the spectator and spares him effort," whereas one must "train for the enjoyment of Picasso" (p. 267). According to Macdonald (1944), "the bad is more easily enjoyed than the good" (p. 21).

Fourth, both groups cited Gresham's Law, according to which low-quality materials drive out high-quality ones (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1945; Macdonald, 1953). They argued that the mass products, news and culture alike, reduce the availability of high-quality products.

Finally, both groups hinted that they themselves were victims of the mass media. In an editorial, *Partisan Review* said that mass culture "weakens the position of the artist and the intellectual profoundly by separating him from his natural audience" ("Our country and our culture: Editorial statement," 1952, p. 285). *A Free and Responsible Press* says that "color and 'hate' words" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 26) in news coverage can feed the audience's prejudices against minority groups. One of the hate words listed may reflect the experience of MacLeish and others in the government: "bureaucratic."

Macdonald's indictment does differ from the Hutchins Commission's in two interrelated fashions. First, whereas the commission talked broadly of the elements of good journalism, Macdonald categorized particular cultural works as good or bad—as he put it, "this is kosher and this is not" (Wreszin, 2001, p. 305). Second, he separated the bad group into two subcategories: mass culture, which he called Masscult, and middlebrow culture, which he called Midcult (Macdonald, 1960a, 1960b). He particularly loathed Midcult, a category in which he included MacLeish's play *J.B.* The Hutchins Commission had no counterpart to Midcult.

### ***The Dangers***

Both groups warned that current trends, unless reversed, would lead to cataclysm—hyperbole that probably stemmed from a flawed understanding of media effects.

The Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) said that "the world seems to be on the brink of suicide" (p. 99), and an irresponsible press could bring about "universal catastrophe" (p. 4) and even the end "of democracy and perhaps of civilization" (p. 106). Macdonald (1957a) linked mass culture to "such malign political growths as Hitler's demagogy" (p. 75) and predicted that "if the US doesn't or cannot change its mass culture . . . it will lose the war against USSR" (Macdonald, 2001, p. 203). Both groups analogized the media's impact on individuals to illness and debilitation: "an actual degenerative process" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1944, p. 38), "a cancerous growth" (Macdonald, 1953, p. 2).

The Macdonald complaint overlaps with the work he had excoriated in 1941: MacLeish's *The Irresponsibles*. Both Macdonald and MacLeish maintained that bad art endangers the world. But three distinctions are important. First, MacLeish held a government position when he published *The Irresponsibles*. Macdonald and other critics believed that the Librarian of Congress was behaving like a czar of culture. Second, whereas MacLeish principally criticized writers, Macdonald focused on the corporate machinery that produces mass culture. Finally, MacLeish stressed the immediate peril posed by fascism, whereas the defeat of the United States seemed to be an afterthought for Macdonald, mentioned only in passing.

The alarmism of both critiques reflects the now-discredited hypodermic model of communication. Gorman (1996) writes that Macdonald treated the masses as "highly susceptible to manipulation and exploitation" (p. 184). Such commentary has faded from prominence, according to Gorman, as communication researchers have found that the media are not so potent. Blanchard (1998), Pickard (2008), and Blevens (1995) assert that the Hutchins Commission critique of the news media also rests on the hypodermic model, though Gary (2005) argues that the commission rejected the era's dominant "propaganda anxiety."

### **Solutions**

*A Free and Responsible Press* features a chapter titled "What Can Be Done" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, pp. 79–106), and the penultimate section of "Masscult and Midcult" opens with the question "What is to be done?" (Macdonald, 1960b, p. 625). But the proffered solutions differ.

The Hutchins Commission sought not just to identify problems but to solve them, and it was confident that it had found the solutions. The report states that if its recommendations are implemented, the press "will be brought much closer" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 102) to providing what society needs. The recommendations themselves are modest: mainly mechanisms for incentivizing social responsibility among publishers, along with a call for the creation of "a new and independent agency to appraise and report annually upon the performance of the press" (p. 100). The agency would seek to improve not just the press but also the public, by "educat[ing] the people as to the aspirations which they ought to have for the press" (pp. 100–101).

Macdonald's answer to "What is to be done?" changed with time, and he never framed it with the confidence of the Hutchins Commission. In 1944, he rejected the view of "reactionary prophets like Ortega [*sic*] y Gasset" that "the only road to sanity is to rebuild the old class walls and bring the masses once more under aristocratic control" (Macdonald, 1944, p. 23). Instead, he predicted that the mass-culture problem might be solved by the arrival of a "new *human* culture, in Trotsky's phrase, which for the first time in history has a chance of superseding the class cultures of the present and past" (Macdonald, 1944, p. 23). By 1953, he was less hopeful. "Far from Mass Culture getting better," he wrote, "we will be lucky if it doesn't get worse" (Macdonald, 1953, p. 17). In 1958, he said he had abandoned his original "quasi-Marxist conclusion" in favor of "one that inclines to the position of T. S. Eliot and Ortega y Gasset" (Macdonald, 1958, p. 356). Two years later, he sketched "a compromise between the conservative and

liberal proposals which I think is worth considering" (Macdonald, 1960b, p. 629): an expansion of high-culture nonprofit or commercial institutions that serve niche audiences.

The Hutchins Commission was optimistic; Macdonald was pessimistic. The commission expressed "a refreshing optimism about the possibilities for improvement—not just of journalism but of humankind, too" (Tucher, 2000, p. 57), whereas Macdonald outlined a problem from which "there seemed neither relief nor escape" (Howe, 1968, p. 35). Perhaps the distinction helps explain the endurance of the former in the study of journalism and the decline of the latter in the study of popular culture. *A Free and Responsible Press*, though certainly the subject of criticism (e.g., Merrill, 1974; Udick, 1993), "is now regarded as one of the most important documents in the history of American media" (Dennis & DeFleur, 2010, p. 387). By contrast, Macdonald's work has been demoted in the field of popular culture studies. According to Gorman (1996), "while Macdonald remains the American writer most commonly cited in popular culture analyses, he is most often invoked as an example of 'what went wrong' with mass culture criticism" (p. 191).

### **Contextualizing the Critiques**

#### ***Democracy, the Marketplace, and Cultural Elitism***

One challenge facing both the Commission on Freedom of the Press and the New York intellectuals was reconciling their faith in the American public with their disapproval of the public's media choices. Media executives maintained that whatever the public wanted, a corporation would supply it. If one corporation refused, others would rush in. By claiming to be giving the public what it wanted, the executives could deflect criticism. They could argue that critics of the mass media are actually critics of the masses (Stanton, 1960).

The critics of mass culture and those of news media came up with varying responses. At times, they sought to shift the blame back to the corporations. Both Macdonald (1953, 1960a) and the Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) argued that media corporations do respond to the public appetite, but it is an appetite distorted by the corporations' limited offerings and potent advertising. At one point, Macdonald (1953), but not the Hutchins Commission, further contended that the media products are "imposed from above" as "an instrument of political domination" (pp. 2–3). Ultimately, Macdonald (1960b) concluded that supply and demand in mass culture reinforce each other; "which came first . . . is a question as academic as it is unanswerable" (p. 627).

There is no escaping the elitist nature of the two critiques, as has been widely noted by scholars writing about the Hutchins Commission (e.g., Blanchard, 1998; Bollinger, 2000) and those writing about New York intellectuals (e.g., Gorman, 1996; Kristol, 1979). The picture can be viewed from many angles. One can see the critics of mass culture and those of the news media as intellectual snobs, a self-appointed aristocracy, and antidemocratic elitists concerning media products, though often with a dedication to democracy and equality in the political realm. Or one can see them as pursuing one of the goals of criticism set forth by T. S. Eliot (1932): "the correction of taste" (p. 13). Or one can see them as educators. For his book *Freedom of the Press: A Framework of Principle*,

William Ernest Hocking (1947) invited other commission members to add footnotes of commentary. In one passage, Hocking wrote: "It would hardly do to make free speech free and listening compulsory, though that might be the speaker's dream!" Robert Hutchins responded in a footnote: "This is doubtless why men become professors" (p. 162).

### ***Behind and Beyond the Critiques***

Funders can redirect research in a field, as William J. Buxton (1994), Brett Gary (1996), David E. Morrison (2008), and Jefferson Pooley (2011) all show. The Commission on Freedom of the Press existed solely because Henry Luce came up with the idea, persuaded Hutchins that it was feasible, and provided the money. Luce's biographer calls him an "intellectual omnivore" (Brinkley, 2010, p. 416) who believed that "putting smart and eminent people together (he was drawn especially to what he called 'philosophers and thinkers') was always a good way to solve a problem" (p. 415).

For his part, Macdonald needed no outsider either to suggest a study of mass culture or to pay for it. He could follow his interests, not the interests of funders. He made his own opportunities. Perhaps, though, not money but politics drove Macdonald to examine mass culture, at a time when prospects for socialism in the United States were dwindling. He published his first article on mass culture in 1940. He continued writing principally about politics through the 1940s, according to Christopher Lasch (1965), and thereafter wrote mostly about culture. Howe (1968), while noting the risk of reductionism, suggested that mass-culture criticism "replace[d] the criticism of bourgeois society" (p. 36) for some New York intellectuals. He added: "If you couldn't stir the proletariat to action, you could denounce Madison Avenue in comfort" (p. 36).

### **Conclusion**

In the middle of the 20th century, two groups criticized the media choices made by their fellow citizens. The Commission on Freedom of the Press, chaired by Robert M. Hutchins, deplored the news media. The New York intellectuals, particularly Dwight Macdonald, deplored mass culture. Despite differences between the two groups and between the critiques they advanced, the Hutchins Commission and the mass-culture critics overlapped in many respects, including their misconceptions.

Henry Luce's intellectual curiosity provided the impetus behind the Commission on Freedom of the Press. Without Luce, the commission's critique of the news media vanishes. As for Macdonald—and this is more speculative—perhaps the decline of 1930s radicalism prompted him to turn away from politics and focus instead on culture in general and mass culture in particular. The demise of the Left may be the indispensable condition precedent for the Macdonald critique of mass culture, just as the interest of Luce was a precondition for the Commission on Freedom of the Press.

Neither *A Free and Responsible Press* nor the Macdonald critique is the product of the common funding model of today, in which researchers develop proposals and seek support from funding agencies. From a higher level of generality, though, the commission's and Macdonald's critiques raise two provocative questions about opportunity structures, financial and otherwise. First,

what projects, along the lines of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, are being done principally because of the interest of paymasters? In his study of Ford Foundation priorities, Pooley (2011) writes that funders of communications research shifted their priorities after 2000 “from psychological warfare to social justice” (p. 212). In journalism, similarly, an editor’s priorities can become a writer’s priorities, as Macdonald knew from his years working for Luce at *Fortune*. Second, what projects, along the lines of Macdonald’s mass-culture work, are being done principally because scholars and writers, dismayed by the direction of politics, have abandoned earlier, politically engaged agendas? (The opposite, of course, may happen, too: dismay over politics may fuel engagement and research.) To pose the questions differently, under what circumstances does the attraction of money spawn research, and under what circumstances does the repulsion of politics spawn research? Even if they are ultimately unanswerable, as Macdonald said of the supply-versus-demand question in mass culture, these questions merit consideration. As the examples of Hutchins et al. and Macdonald et al. illustrate, factors outside the control of researchers and writers—not only funding ecology but also political ecology—can determine the direction of their work.

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