

❖ **Géraldine Muhlmann – *A Political History of Journalism*
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Reviewed by Antonio Castillo

The late Normal Mailer described a *Political History of Journalism* as “a truly intelligent and well written book on this most elusive subject – what indeed, is at the heart of that matter we call journalism.” Mailer’s comment is a major endorsement and a well deserved one.

First published in 2004 as *Une histoire politique du journalism*, Géraldine Muhlmann has produced one of the most assertive analyses on journalism. Muhlmann is Professor of Political Science and Political Philosophy at the University of Paris (Panthéon-Assas). She is an awarded scholar. In 2003 she received *Le Monde’s* best 2003 academic research award for her study “The journalist’s eye: Historical Conditions and Political Implications since 1880.” She is also the author of *Du journalisme en Démocratie* (Payot: 2006).

As the author suggests this book is a “sort of personal and political history of modern journalism” with the central objective of answering a key question: What can we learn from the history of journalism since the end of the nineteenth century? In the pursuit of this central objective, the author identifies and analyses with painstaking details two opposing traditions, the *unifying* and *decentring* tendencies of modern journalism.

They are tendencies in permanent tension. This tension is produced by the coexistence of *unifying* journalism that attempts to give readers a truth accepted by all and *decentring* journalism whose aim is to question the official and accepted version of events. While *unifying* gives a “single gaze” to any given newsworthy event; *decentring* attempts to give a multiplicity of *gazes*. *Decentring* journalism aims to provide - as the author argues - a *gaze* that challenges the dominant mainstream journalism.

Unifying journalism brings a sort of reportage of agreements and consensus. It is about reducing the level of disagreements on news events. *Decentring* is on the other hand a journalism that pursues dissonant voices and generates conflicts by refusing to follow the mainstream news angle. By *decentring* journalists keep people talking. *Unifying* journalism advocates one single accepted view of a newsworthy event, while *decentring* journalism subverts the hegemonic version. It creates dissent.

The current state of journalism and its future has been a recurrent theme of discussion and analysis in academia and also in news industry. Academics speak of the loss of quality in modern journalism and journalists despair at the possibility of being just content providers.

While Muhlmann's book is not a recipe to resolve the alleged malaise of journalism – a profession that the great Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez called the most beautiful profession ever – it offers historical clues on the vast possibilities of journalism either as a *unifying* or *decentring* process.

Muhlmann is genuinely concerned about journalism and in her book she places on the table the challenges of contemporary journalism. In contrast to common academic books on journalism, her appraisal is gentle and exudes respect for the profession. There is not one hint of negativity in her analysis.

A Political History of Journalism is richly embedded in history, politics and philosophy. The book is clearly structured in seven chapters. In each chapter the author illustrates the *unifying* and *decentring* journalism traditions, which are very well illustrated with the work of past and contemporary journalists. She has the ability to choose their most emblematic stories and dissect them. The stories she has chosen for her analysis should be compulsory studies in any journalism programme.

It is in history where the author finds the corner stone of the *unifying* tradition in early journalism. This was a journalism that "desires to bring people together." The author writes that the socio-political aim of *unifying* "is a matter of producing a collectively acceptable gaze that conforms to the general norms of the 'public'" (p.10).

A central role in *unifying* is played by figure of the "witness-ambassador" who is the reporter who sees "all in our name" (p.22). "This figure of the witness-ambassador was undoubtedly the favoured figure of popular journalism in the second half of the nineteenth century," (p.23) the authors remind us. "The 'I' sees in all our names" (p.26). While *unifying* journalism means the reporter becomes a witness-ambassador, he or she is our representative; *decentring* journalism locates the journalist apart from "us." "They say to the readers: What I see is precisely what you can, you do not see and probably cannot easily see," writes Muhlmann (p.29).

One of the most powerful stories dissected by Muhlmann is by French anarchist and journalist Severine (1855-1929) whose coverage of Alfred Dreyfus's trial illustrates the *unifying* role of journalists. The selection Severine's writing is "emblematic of the figure - witness-ambassador" (p.36).

Her analysis includes the work of key figures in modern journalism such as Seymour M. Hersh, Michael Herr, George Orwell and Norman Mailer. The author also relies on journalistic traditions such as the one developed by the French daily *Libération* and by the New Journalism. For Muhlmann they are expressions of *decentring* journalism.

The *decentring* tradition of journalism is vigorously argued by looking at Seymour M. Hersh and Michael Herr's coverage of Vietnam. They are two outstanding reporters who care about good journalism. They are two *decentring* reporters. They are not looking for consensus about the carnage of war. In their writing they provide those dissonant voices that thrive in *decentring* journalism. They search for new *gazes* and aim to keep people talking.

Muhlmann analysis of Hersh's coverage of the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam is tremendously powerful. This is the massacre that shook the consciousness of the American public opinion. In this *decentring* news coverage Hersh told his readers that about 500 Vietnamese in the small village of My Lai believed to harbour the Vietcong were massacred by a group of US soldiers.

Michael Herr followed suit. He is the author of series of stories between 1967 to 1969. He was

also the author of the acclaimed 1977 reportage *Dispatches*. In his *decentring* texts, Herr "tried to grasp the very emergence of violence" (p. 243). Hersh and Herr are reporters who want to make Americans see "an otherness" and "strangeness" – the murderous actions of the GIs – that is "destructive of the American identity" (p. 232).

Both journalists have something in common, they are war reporters immersed in a state of violence that doesn't only physically kill but also kills souls and morality. In their reportage they are not interested in "agreements" or "consensus." They want to *decentre* the public opinion, the one that was so effective for that genocide.

Géraldine Muhlmann also engages in a superb and detailed study of *decentring* journalism by looking at Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, the book-reportage on the 1976 march on the Pentagon, against the Vietnam War. Mailer is an ideal case study. His work is framed by conflict.

One of the expressions of *decentring* journalism – a challenge to modern mainstream *unifying* journalism – is the daily newspaper *Libération*. Created by Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris in 1973, the newspaper aimed "to provide *another gaze* than that dominant in 'bourgeois' journalism" (p. 165). It was a challenge to the *dominant gaze*. This was exposed as the expression of a *singular* and hegemonic voice. The aim of *Libération* was essentially to *decentre* by way of questioning and engaging with conflicting points of view.

New Journalism took a similar approach. It also pursued similar processes of *decentring*. Like *Libération*, New Journalism was an attempt to invent a new tradition of newsgathering and writing. They rejected the notion of *unifying* and instead they attempted to subvert the consensus that mainstream journalism aims to achieve. Objectivity become a superfluous aim.

Géraldine Muhlmann has produced an excellent book for those who study, practice and are concerned about the state and future of journalism. Academics and students of journalism will find it immensely thoughtful and engaging. Journalists should also read it. However this won't happen. I'm less optimistic with my colleagues in the profession, especially among Anglo-Saxon journalists, who for some unexplained reason tend to regard with suspicion any notion of intellectualisation of journalism. Most of them, in the mainstream, are glued to the tradition of *unifying journalism*. They seek consensus by avoiding covering those perspectives that may *decentre* their audiences. At a time when the media tend to reinforce rather than challenge the views of the elite, *decentring journalism* seems to have no prospect of flourishing. For those attempting to engage in *decentring journalism* they should leave (or risk being sacked) their "mainstream" milieu and start blogging.

A Political History of Journalism is an immensely important book. It is a major study that brings together political science, history, philosophy and sociology with the objective of producing a new addition to the study of journalism as an academic endeavour. It is a truly original scholarly approach to journalism.

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