

# Book Review

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Alexandra Kitty

*When Journalism Was a Thing*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2018. Paperback \$38.95. 439 pp. ISBN: 9781785356544.

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Journalism used to be everything until the day it became nothing. What happened and why? That's the question posed in *When Journalism was a Thing* by Alexandra Kitty, who is the author of several similar books, including *Don't Believe It!: How lies become news* and *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's war on journalism*, both of which were published in 2005. Her critique emanates from the Journalism Studies field which considers the profession more critically than do most j-schools in North America. Kitty's no-holds-barred assault on journalism is both withering and exhausting. In an over-the-top open letter to journalists, she first lays a litany of sins at the feet of a flawed profession. "You openly lie . . . with your every story by cribbing from press releases," she begins. "You have caused wars. . . spread hate . . . prejudice . . . fear [and] absolute panic" (p. 1). She is just getting started. "You have no moral high ground to take, and you have proven to be unteachable. . . You have become mudslingers covered in the stench of your own laziness" (pp. 1-2 and 3). As a scold, Kitty proves a veritable Energizer Bunny. "Where were you when young people were being recruited by terrorists in their own schools . . . when countless women were being beaten . . . when pedophiles were getting positions of power [and] the poor were destroyed?" (p. 4) By now it is obvious that Kitty holds the press to so high a standard as to include ubiquity, omniscience, and omnipotence. What she sees instead is nothing short of malice. "Shame on you for your lies, manipulations, prejudices, and vendettas," her open letter continues. "It is rot and it is a reflection on your broken soul" (p. 5).

For the Preface, she switches from the second person to the first. "I saw it all," she writes. "I saw the ideological stagnation . . . I saw the cluelessness of how to retain audiences, let alone expand the base. Writing hard news stories for youth was shunned" (p. 7). Kitty speaks from some experience, having been a writer for the industry magazines *Presstime* and *Editor & Publisher*. "Even as a twenty-something journalist, I saw the cataclysm coming. I saw it and did what I could to snap the profession out of its slumber, but journalists . . . could not see their own downfall coming" (p. 9). Unlike

many in her generation, she believes that digital media only made things worse. "Online journalism did not pick up the slack or improve the product," she writes. "The tone was always smug, sanctimonious, and snarky, but it also has a distinctly partisan bent" (p. 15). As a Canadian author with a U.K. publisher, she includes a refreshing array of international examples in chronicling press failure, most prominently its role in the demise of Rob Ford, the late Toronto mayor best known for his excesses of eating, drinking, and drug taking. Her constant criticism is grinding, but at least her point is easy to grasp. "The influence of the press is now negligible," she concludes. "It is a shocking fall from grace" (p. 19).

By mid-book she has diagnosed a cause for journalism's downfall. All the sins she sees in journalism, she in turn blames on journalism education. According to Kitty, we are responsible for nothing less than the "miseducation" of a profession. "The problem is that journalists have had no training that has clued them in that their blinders are only cementing their demise," writes the 1996 graduate of Western University's M.A. program in Journalism (p. 165). She thinks j-schools should be teaching psychology to help grads better empathize with interviewees. "Psychology is an essential subject for any to know," she writes. "Understanding people's thought processes is essential to the profession" (pp. 354-355). Her list of subjects that reporters need to study also includes history, political science, sociology, anthropology, criminology, economics, and military strategy. She even claims that journalism educators have failed to adequately study the profession and its techniques. "There is no school of thought in journalism . . . There aren't scientific experiments conducted in journalism faculties" (p. 168). Kitty argues that teaching a more scientific journalism is critical for the profession's survival. "How should reporters interview different sources? How should they use undercover techniques?" (p. 340)

Much of Kitty's criticism of journalism is warranted, but a lot seems like piling on. Her fingering of the academy as the source of journalism's ills is particularly unconvincing. Her complaints that journalism educators have failed to adequately study the profession and its techniques, that there is no school of thought in journalism, and that there are no scientific experiments conducted in journalism faculties are simply uninformed. Her call for a more scientific journalism has been made before, first by Walter Lippmann, whom she quotes more than once, but most notably by Philip Meyer, of whom she seems unaware. Many of the specific failings she sees in journalism education seem due to a lack of looking, which brings to mind the old saw about a little knowledge being a dangerous thing.