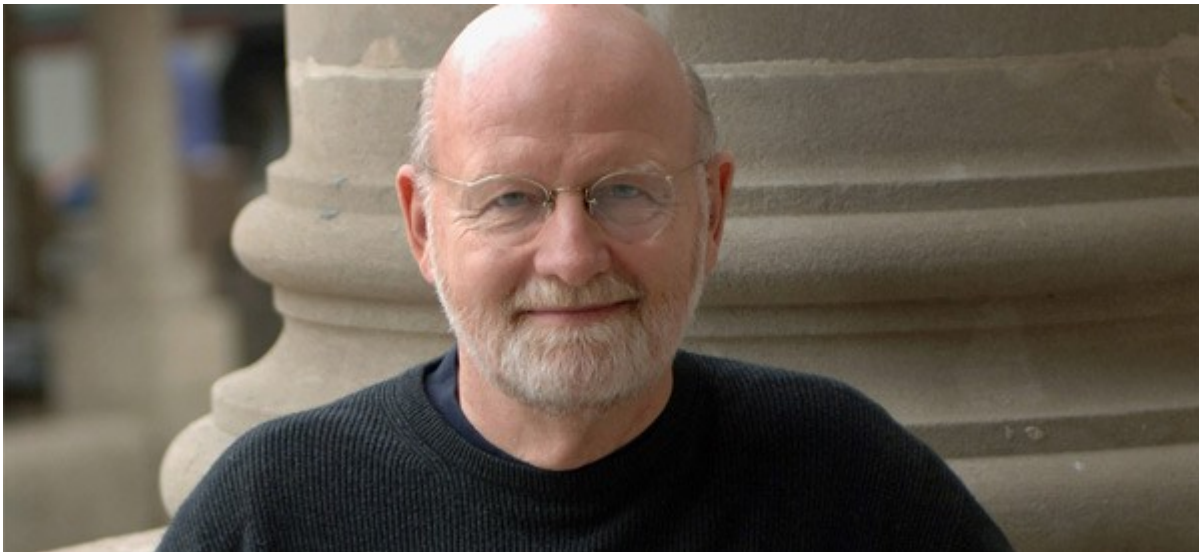


The Romance and Reality of Foreign Reporting

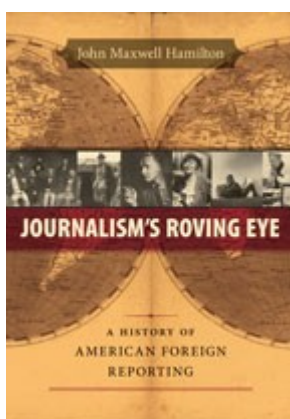
A Q&A With John Maxwell Hamilton, author of *Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting*.

By Jack Shafer Posted Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2009, at 3:24 PM ET



"All the problems of journalism are magnified in foreign news-gathering," John Maxwell Hamilton writes in his new book *Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting*.

Foreign news is expensive to collect, Hamilton observes, and tough to vet because editors can't second-guess it the way they can city-hall coverage. But the biggest obstacle facing U.S. media operations isn't gathering foreign news and publishing it. It's getting readers and viewers to pay attention to it. The public's appetite for foreign news oscillates, Hamilton writes, usually paralleling the United States' entry into a war or the touchdown of a killer typhoon elsewhere on the planet. When the war winds down or the floodwaters recede, so does reader interest and eventually the commitment of publishers and editors to sustain coverage.



And yet for more than two centuries a commitment to covering foreign news has signified a U.S. news organization's ambition to be taken seriously. When ABC News wanted to compete with CBS and NBC in the 1970s, it expanded its foreign coverage. When CNN arrived, it too invested heavily in foreign bureaus. Flush with profits in the 1980s and 1990s, American newspapers that had historically paid scant attention to gathering news from abroad established their own foreign outposts. Since the media crash of this decade, those new outposts have been largely shuttered, leaving giants like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Associated Press*, *NPR*, *Tribune*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *GlobalPost* startup, and a few others to collect world news expressly for American readers.

In charting the highs and lows of this craft, Hamilton reminds readers that foreign news has always occupied a precarious place in the news business and suggests that foreign-news reporting isn't so much in decline as it is in transition. The Internet has made the foreign press accessible in real time to the U.S. audience, and modern transportation and communications hubs have made it easier for resourceful reporters to "parachute" into stories.

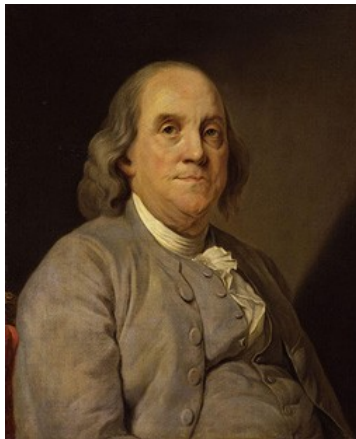
Hamilton, a former foreign correspondent himself, concludes his book in this burst of optimism: "The new species of correspondents emerging from the bog of history can serve us well, and maybe even better."

(Note to readers: I've added links to a couple of Hamilton's answers to provide additional background.) [Chapter excerpt](#) from *Journalism's Roving Eye*, courtesy Louisiana State University Press.

Q: You write that the earliest American newspaper publishers—Benjamin Franklin among them—favored foreign news over domestic. Why was that?

A: As with so much that has to do with journalism in general, the answer is one of practicality. Americans cared about events in Europe. They were a colony after all. So, there was a market for news from abroad. And foreign news was less likely to get printers in trouble with colonial authorities, who held considerable power over their ability to publish in those days.

But the reason that should interest us most is that foreign news was cheap. Newspapers in those days did not have reporters, let alone correspondents overseas. The first foreign correspondents were friendly souls in London or Paris who wrote letters home as well as passengers and crew who hove into port with newspapers from abroad as well as their own stories to tell. European newspapers and journals brought by ship were the equivalent of today's overseas wire services. Colonial newspapers freely reprinted official government pronouncements and other news found in those journals. Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* lifted more than four-fifths of its news about the British Isles directly from other newspapers. When harsh winter weather disrupted shipping or someone lost precious printed cargo, news dried up. "The Delay of Ships expected in and want of fresh Advices from *Europe*," Franklin once observed, "make it frequently very Dull; and I find the Freezing of Our River has the same Effect on News as on Trade."



Benjamin Franklin

This should interest us as a lesson about circumstances today. With the arrival of specialized editors and reporters working for newspapers that existed for the sole purpose of providing news—rather than as an ancillary to a printing business—the supply of foreign news became much smaller. Today foreign news is one of the most expensive kinds of news and, unlike in colonial days, one of the categories with the lowest levels of audience interest.

Q: So American foreign reporting owes its beginnings—or a large part of its beginnings—to either piracy or plagiarism, depending on how you view it? And the coastal plagiarizers were in turn plagiarized by inland plagiarizers?

A: Yes, I guess one could say this to be provocative. But not just foreign reporting fell into this category. As your example suggests, American newspapers were not only lifting from foreign papers, but from each other—and this included domestic news. The driver here was that they needed to fill space. And remember they also had letters from people abroad that ended up in the paper. Franklin himself wrote some from London before the revolution broke out.

Q: *This passive collection of foreign news ends in the 1830s as [James Gordon Bennett](#), an experienced journalist and owner of the New York Herald, becomes the first American publisher to go "after foreign news, rather than waiting for it to come to him," as you put it. His reporters dash further out to sea to collect news from ships arriving from Europe, and he establishes the first network of foreign correspondents for a U.S. paper. What was his motivation? His inspiration?*

A: Bennett is the prototype for the entrepreneurial newspaper proprietor who cares about developing a mass audience but wants to appeal to an elite audience as well. Of course, we need to keep in mind that newspapers were just beginning to become large circulation dailies with staffs having special expertise. Professional reporting was still in its infancy. Bennett could be quite loose by our standards. But he recognized that he could attract readers with a combination of entertainment and crime, and Washington reporting, and business news, as well as foreign news. In fact, foreign news and business news converged, as business people cared about foreign news because that was a dollars-and-cents issue for them.



James Gordon Bennett

In publishing quite a lot of foreign news, Bennett competed with the more expensive and stodgy commercial newspapers, who also sent out boats to acquire foreign news. As a young man, Bennett had worked for these papers. They were his journalism school. They came to hate him because he competed with them so successfully.

Bennett's *Herald* had the highest circulation of any American newspaper because he satisfied so many audiences. Other mass-market papers—which also belonged to the so-called "penny newspapers"—did well by sticking largely to stories at home, which avoided the cost of foreign news. And it has been thus ever since.

In jumping forward to our own times, we see some that the *New York Times* is the heir to Bennett's approach. It is a mass-market newspaper that is relatively elite and public-service minded. As an aside, we also see that business media—the *Wall Street Journal* and Bloomberg News—continue the tradition of commercial newspapers caring about foreign news. They have learned to do it in a way that can be highly profitable. Most newspapers, however, give relatively little attention to foreign news, as it is both expensive and of little interest to most readers.

Q: *When, how, and why did the job of foreign correspondent become such a romantic position? Is it still? When did its status peak?*

A: Foreign correspondence has a natural element of romanticism—and this could be seen as soon as that class of professional reporter emerged in the last half of the 19th century. "The special correspondent must be 'to the manor born,' " observed a *Scribner's* author in 1893. "He must be as sanguine as a songbird, and as strong and willing as a race horse."

To start with, the correspondent was traveling abroad, not staying home like everyone else, and socializing with the top ranks of foreign society. Correspondents were expected by management to travel first class, as befit their status as envoys from the paper. (Owners often saw their overseas bureaus as embassies for their newspaper.) There were wonderful opportunities to inflate expense accounts. More important, a correspondent was highly independent compared to reporters at home who could see their bosses across the room every day. Media proprietors and their editors tended to send their best reporters abroad (another element of the romanticism), and when those bosses began to give out bylines, correspondents got more than their share, which elevated their status still further. William Randolph Hearst hired [Richard Harding Davis](#) to go abroad for him because he had a name—and Hearst added to Davis' luster by running stories under that name. The movies and later radio helped, too, so that by the 1930s correspondents were in many cases not just romantic figures but celebrities.



Richard Harding Davis

This has changed for reasons related to the above. Today it is much easier for anyone to go abroad, sometimes just for a weekend the way one used to go to the shore. The distant is much more familiar to all of us. So, a correspondent is less special. Then there is the matter of independence. Thanks to modern communication, editors can be in touch with a correspondent all day long, checking their work and telling them what to do. Everyone these days gets bylines, too, so that is not special anymore, either.

In fact, going abroad can today be a detriment to a career, not a plus. If you want to be a network anchor, going abroad for three or four years is not nearly as useful as being on the *Today Show*, where people see you all the time. The early anchors were celebrities and had overseas experience. Don't expect that today.

Q: Starting with the New York Herald 1869 assignment of Henry Morton Stanley to find missionary-explorer [David Livingstone](#), U.S. foreign reporting seems top-heavy with gimmicks not that far removed from today's reality TV. Newspapers sponsor Arctic and Antarctic explorations and they send reporters around the world to see if they can beat the Jules Verne 80-day mark. Can you defend this pathetic journalism/skeezy infotainment?

A: The "find Livingstone" form of news is at one level frivolous, agreed. And there was a lot of it being cooked up at the time, some in ways that were irresponsible. Stanley was a troubled character, and we can also note James Gordon Bennett's ill-fated Arctic escapades discussed in my book. But not all of this "make news" was without virtue.

First, news moguls of the era supported important exploration. The rivers and lakes and islands that were named after owners and editors testify to this (some have stuck and some haven't).

Second, what correspondents found on these trips was news—or at least new to readers. And that, too, is worth something.

Furthermore, we should not be too sanctimonious about all of this. Even the idea of doing interviews of political leaders abroad (as well as at home) was a make-news activity. The British press was behind us on this trick, which is now taken for granted all over the world. The fact is that making news is a regular feature of responsible modern journalism.

But here is the real kicker. This news was a hell of a lot of fun to read. Who would not want to follow Nellie Bly's around-the-world trip for Pulitzer's *World*—a race, by the way, in which she was [pitted against](#) another comely journalist, Elizabeth Bisland of *Cosmopolitan* magazine? Or track similar subsequent races between papers—the Bly-Bisland contest was repeated by others for years at ever-increasing speeds? These stories attracted readers, something that the news media yearn for today.



Nellie Bly

Here, I think, is the real question: Why does the press give us so much entertainment news today that is so insipid—so inferior—compared to what we had in those good old days? Maybe the issue is not gimmicks as such. Maybe it is the quality of them. Maybe we would have more readers—and viewers and listeners—for foreign news if the media were a little less stodgy from time to time and acted with verve and real daring.

Q: The Spanish-American War was an epochal event in the history of American foreign reporting, showing for the first time what sort of journalism could be done from a distance if publishers were willing to spend heavily. It also demonstrated that neither newspapers nor readers sustain much of an interest in foreign reporting outside of war zones, and then mostly if Americans are involved. What sort of grade would you give the wide range of reporting that came out of that war?

A: The Spanish-American War was not a bright moment for American journalism. Indeed, I would argue that it was worse than most people understand.

But first let's deal with another related misunderstanding, to wit, William Randolph Hearst's famous admonition to his artist Frederic Remington, whom he sent to Cuba. When Remington said no war loomed, Hearst replied by telegram. "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." At least that is the legend. There is [no evidence](#) that Hearst really said this, except from one untrustworthy source, James Creelman. Creelman was one of Hearst's correspondents in Cuba. What made the Creelman story so appealing was that it helped pin the blame for the war on the yellow press, made up of owners like Hearst and Pulitzer.

Historians have come to agree that the theory of a yellow-press-made war is errant. The sensational press did not start the war any more than Hearst wrote the telegram. Many forces—cultural, political, economic—contributed to the war. But in rethinking the war, historians have also tended to push the press out of the picture altogether. And this, too, is wrong.

The press—and not just the yellow press—played a role in the march to war. As I argue the point, it created an enabling environment. Journalists of all stripes—the Associated Press and the responsible *New York Times* included—published enormous amounts of reporting on Cuba, putting it on the public agenda. Much of this news, if one dares use such a term, was biased; a good portion was incendiary and at times wildly inaccurate. This coverage helped fuel national passions, which in turn had an influence on President McKinley's decision to declare war.

We do have some exceptions. The *Chicago Daily News*, which pointed the way to a new era in foreign reporting after its experience covering the war, was highly responsible. Thanks to a few bright spots like that, I might agree to give the press a D.

Q: Your book has a couple of early-20th-century examples of American foreign correspondents "going native" in Asia. Is it inevitable that foreign correspondents will start indentifying with the region they're reporting from at the expense of the readers they're supposed to be serving?

A: Going native is an age-old problem that confronts editors. Do you want a fresh set of eyes to look at the foreign scene and explain it? Do you want someone with deep knowledge who truly understands the issues? More than one correspondent has been recalled or fired because he or she simply got too sucked into the foreign scene. But it is not inevitable that a correspondent abroad for a long time falls into the trap. One way to avoid this is to move correspondents to other countries after two or three years. Yet another is to recall a correspondent for a spell to be reacquainted with the home country. My own view is that some of the most useful reporting abroad has been done by men and women with extensive experience in that enterprise. They are the ones who can point us to stories that the untutored reporter is not likely to recognize.

Q: You portray Victor Fremont Lawson, who ran the Chicago Daily News, as somewhat of a foreign coverage pioneer in the early 20th century. What did Lawson bring to the form? [See [this chapter](#) about Lawson from Journalism's Roving Eye. (PDF)]



Victor Fremont Lawson

Victor Lawson is one of my heroes. He combined good business sense with high-minded public service. Neither he nor the paper he owned, the *Chicago Daily News*, get the attention or credit they deserve. It is fair to say, I believe, that Lawson more than any other newspaper proprietor invented our modern concepts of profitable, responsible daily journalism.

One of the areas in which he was a leader was that of foreign reporting. His paper was the first to field a corps of American correspondents who were selected because they could effectively report for Americans but who were nevertheless left abroad long enough to acquire real expertise. Some of his reporters had a tendency to go native, but they were superb, possessing a long list of contacts and experience.

Before Lawson, very few American correspondents were stationed abroad permanently; most correspondents were foreigners hired by the home office. Those Americans who were abroad spent a lot of time cribbing from foreign papers. Lawson wanted his correspondents to do original reporting.

Lawson created a model that would be followed by the *New York Times* and others. In fact, Adolph Ochs had a photo of Lawson in his office. So he was not just my hero.

Q: Jack Belden—who covered the Japanese invasion of China, Gen. Stilwell's Burma retreat, the war in North Africa and Italy, the invasion of France, and the Chinese revolution—reads like a character out of Jack London. I was especially taken by his dispatch from [Salerno for Life](#) that you excerpt. Did you run across a larger journalistic character in your research? I can't imagine.

A: No, I didn't run across any larger character in researching the book. And I was glad to put the spotlight on him. He was a superb combat reporter who, due to his own troubled personality, fell from view. It is as though he never really existed. *When Time* magazine

reprises the great war reporting that has appeared in its pages, it does not even mention Belden.



Jack Belden

His significance, of course, is larger than his own accomplishments. He foreshadows what is now recognized as a major problem for combat reporters, the psychological trauma that comes from and feeds off of war.

But Belden is not the only character in the book who is both commanding and an important benchmark. I already have mentioned Victor Lawson. Another is Vincent Sheean, whose reporting was brilliant for its political insights and highly literary. He, too, deserves a full biography of his own.

Q: I got the strong sense from your book that foreign reporting was primarily a vanity and prestige ploy by editors and publishers. Most readers have paged past the copy, especially in the modern era. The number of correspondents who made a difference with their reporting—I'm thinking of people like David Halberstam, Malcolm Brown, and Neil Sheehan in Vietnam—are few and far between, and now that newspapers such as the Baltimore Sun, Chicago Tribune, Boston Globe, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and many others are no longer flush with cash, they've abandoned foreign postings. Is it permanent twilight for the enterprise?

A: I don't think that foreign reporting was primarily a vanity activity for most newspaper and broadcast proprietors. Good foreign reporting has come from news media with two attributes. One is a relatively upscale audience. The other is an owner with an elevated sense of the mission of journalism. This is not to say that owners and their editors did not get a great psychic benefit out of having their own embassies abroad, or being able to strut in front of fellow owners who did not have foreign correspondents, or wielding the power that came with covering the world.

Without being too long-winded, I hope, let me add that my comments above are broad and do not apply quite the same way in every case. The Associated Press is not an elite media; it does foreign news because it spreads out the costs for its members, many of whom would otherwise have little news from abroad. And consider television. In the early years, NBC and CBS did not have an elite audience. But they were the only two broadcast networks doing foreign news. It made sense for them to compete in this type of reporting because they only had to beat each other. Now, of course, all sorts of entities—cable and foreign networks like the BBC that are accessible to American audiences—can provide foreign images. Faced with this and the fact that the best audience demographic for foreign news is the one least interesting to advertisers (middle aged men), foreign coverage makes less sense for broadcasters. One reason that NPR is the very best radio operation doing foreign reporting is tied to its having a relatively better-educated audience.



David Halberstam

Now to your very important question about the future. On this point, I would say two things.

First, for most of the 20th century we had a clearly defined model for what a foreign correspondent was. This does not mean that boyish and trivial adventurers like Richard Halliburton did not also cover the world. But a relatively small number of elite media had a lock on serious reporting. This old model will not disappear. The *New York Times* and AP and others remain strong in the foreign field. But we now have many types of journalists reporting from aboard. Some resemble types from the distance past. Those letter writers who gave Benjamin Frank-

lin material for his paper are akin to today's bloggers. Furthermore, while some famous foreign services have disappeared, as you note, some new ones have arisen. Since 1992, Bloomberg has put far more editors and reporters abroad than have been lost during that period of time, really hundreds more. And another new dimension is the ability of news consumers to get news themselves, simply by reading foreign newspapers online. This only begins to touch the surface of change. But the main point I am trying to make is that we now have multiple models.

The second point is that we should not be surprised that foreign newsgathering—or, indeed, newsgathering of any kind—is going through such a traumatic period. Serious organized journalism is not that old a profession. Looking at it in terms of the broad sweep of history, it is in the toddler stage. That does not mean that we should not be nostalgic about some of the great owners, editors, and reporters who brought news this far. But there were plenty of ark moments too. Journalism, like democracy, is not something that is achieved. It is a work in progress, and not every day is as good as the last. But there will always be journalists, like you, who care about foreign news. Otherwise, why would you be asking me all of these questions?

Jack Shafer is **Slate's** editor at large. Follow him on [Twitter](#).

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