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Seldes and Bagdikian: Great media critics

When I think of newspaper journalists who became authors and had enormous impacts on media criticism in the United States, two names come to mind.

One is George Seldes. As a young man, he covered the First World War and then reported on historic events in Europe for the Chicago Tribune from 1919 until 1928. Seldes quit the paper and went on to blaze a trail as an independent journalist – ready, able and eager to challenge media business-as-usual. Naturally, he earned hostility from the kind of media magnates he skewered in “Lords of the Press.” The renowned historian Charles A. Beard called [that 1938 book] “a grand job.”

Forty-five years later, another emigre from newsrooms wrote a book that turned out to have profound effects on critical thinking about media. When “The Media Monopoly” first appeared in 1983, the media establishment and many of its employees shrugged; if they paid any attention, it was usually just long enough to dismiss Ben Bagdikian’s warning about consolidation of media ownership as alarmist. While the media landscape shifted, Bagdikian saw corporate behemoths on the horizon. “The Media Monopoly” emerged as an illuminating book that provided clarity at a time when there was little understanding – even among journalists – about corporate media power and its implications.

During the past two decades, several updated editions of “The Media Monopoly” have been published, including last year’s revised book titled “The New Media Monopoly.” Meanwhile, an entire generation of media activists has come of age. They understand that centralized dominance of news and information – as a dwindling number of humongous firms control most of the journalistic flow in the United States – undermines the First Amendment and democratic possibilities.

There are a lot of parallels between Seldes and Bagdikian. In the first half of the 20th century, Seldes did some exemplary reporting as a mainstream journalist before opting out of the mass-media system in order to critique it. During the last half of the century, something similar occurred with Bagdikian, who was a high-ranking editor at the Washington Post when he played a key role in making possible the newspaper’s reve-

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lations about contents of the top-secret Pentagon Papers in mid-June 1971.

I've had the great pleasure of talking with both of those intrepid journalists – Seldes during an all-day visit to his rural Vermont home in 1988 (when he was 97 years old) and Bagdikian a number of times, most recently a couple of weeks ago. Their written words clearly mirrored their personal demeanor: steadfastly principled and compassionate while living out a commitment to journalism on behalf of democracy and human rights.

The strong similarities between George Seldes and Ben Bagdikian include unwavering support for labor. With his books and feisty newsletter "In Fact" (published throughout the 1940s), Seldes fiercely advocated for the rights of unions inside and outside the newspaper industries. "Lords of the Press" was dedicated to "the American Newspaper Guild and others interested in a free press."

After leaving the Post, Bagdikian angered top management because he vehemently critiqued the Washington Post Company's vicious suppression of the pressmen's strike in the mid-1970s. At that point, Bagdikian wrote an article for Washington Monthly magazine critical of the Post's anti-labor policies.

More than 20 years later, in 1997, when Washington Post owner Katharine Graham released her autobiography "Personal History" in hardcover, it quoted a note she'd sent to her son in the midst of the bitter labor dispute, saying that Bagdikian's article "literally takes my breath away it's so insane." And she also quoted a memo that she'd sent to the Post's top editor Ben Bradlee: "I am really embarrassed to think this ignorant biased fool was ever national editor. Surely the worst asps in this world are the ones one has clasped to the bosom." Graham had allowed her mogul mentality to triumph over rationality.

When the paperback edition of "Personal History" appeared in early 1998, it contained the same number of pages and was almost identical to the hardcover. But Graham had quietly removed her idiotic sentences about Bagdikian: an unpublicized move that was, in effect, a tacit retraction of her wacky defamation. The episode underscores just how furious – and arrogant – big media owners can get when journalists challenge their prerogatives and power.

Norman Solomon's next book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer by Wiley. His columns and other writings can be found at www.normansolomon.com.