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## Book Review

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Henry, Neil, *American Carnival: Journalism Under Siege in an Age of New Media*, 2007, Berkley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, ISBN 978-0-520-24342-2.

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Which way is north? Which way is east? Which way is Oakland and which way is San Francisco? (...) ‘That’s your first lesson in journalism’, I told them. ‘Always know exactly where you are. In many ways, you guys are explorers. Your responsibility is to bear witness to the truth as you see and hear it, and to tell it accurately...’

When Neil Henry, a former *Washington Post* correspondent who teaches journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, describes a first lesson for a group of students, one gets the impression that he is preparing them for a career in a field which is crammed with adventure, where the colleagues will be the likes of the legendary A.J. Liebling and Nellie Bly and the world is one where the *truth* is out there, to be found with the help of a good compass.

If that is the reality Henry’s students expect to encounter on their first job they risk being disappointed. In today’s fast and technology-intensive media industry, reporting rarely requires more geographical knowledge than what it takes to figure out the route from the cubicle to the coffee machine prior to the next rewrite of wire-news.

However, that is precisely the point made in *American Carnival – Journalism Under Siege in an age of New Media*. Henry sees a journalism in decline, a news media that has become the victim of manipulation by a PR-savvy Government and corporate interests, and where the rapid pace of news production favours petty updates over well-examined content. As such, the lament of declining journalistic standards is certainly not new, something that Henry is also well aware of. What he adds to the

discussion is a detailed account of contemporary US journalism with a particular focus on its relation to the new media, as well as the perspective of a former insider.

Henry builds his case with startling examples of journalistic neglect, incompetence and sometimes even plain fraud. He describes how the Bush administration has managed to get so called 'video news releases' to be presented as news on television networks across America, how journalists are lending their credibility to corporations who make advertisements with a 'news feel' and how that same credibility has been damaged by fraudsters such as *The New Republic's* Stephen Glass and *The New York Times's* Jayson Blair.

Yet Henry makes it easy for his critics – and in an age of competing journalistic ideals and plenty of new media pundits there will be many. One can argue that Henry is often making the error of comparing the best journalism from one era with the worst from another. One can also claim that he is too simplistic in his view of news consumption and audience participation. Some critics would probably even accuse him of being out of touch with the media business. Part of this critique is valid. Nevertheless, if one can overcome some apparent flaws in Henry's analysis, *American Carnival* becomes an interesting commentary on the challenges facing journalism today.

Henry is at his best when he describes what journalism should do rather than what it has done. This is because where many others try to figure out how the media will develop in the future, Henry focuses on why we have, and why we need, journalism in the first place. For Henry the question of the 'truth' is important – both as an idea and as an ideal. New media and new technology facilitate the journalistic modus operandi, but it also means that almost anyone can publish information that looks like journalistic content. Furthermore, mainstream media tend to mimic the practices of efficient bloggers and 'citizen journalists'. For Henry, the answer to the crisis in the media industry today is not for journalists to try to do what the new competition often does better, but to do what the people in the new media never have the resources to do as well. When bloggers provide the opinions, the journalists need to provide the hard facts; while anyone can report on rumours, real reporters need to chase the truth.

The idea isn't earth shattering, but it makes good sense. Like any other business in times of crisis the key to survival is to focus on what you do best. For journalists that means to get out in the field and to 'bear witness to the truth' as they see and hear it, and 'to tell it accurately'. And in such an occupation knowing where you are isn't a bad start.