Michael Scott Van Wagenen is associate professor of history and public history coordinator at Georgia Southern University. He is the author of Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S.-Mexican War (2012) and The Texas Republic and the Mormon Kingdom of God (2002).

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Reviewed by Joshua Specht

Michael Stamm has turned the history of the newspaper inside out. Rather than focusing on the evolution of journalism or the contents of a paper’s editorial page, Stamm tells the material history of newspaper production. It is a fascinating story; the search for ever-cheaper newsprint created supply chains stretching from American doorsteps to Canadian forests. Told largely though the history of the Chicago Tribune and the efforts of its charismatic—if idiosyncratic—publisher Robert McCormick, Dead Tree Media reveals that news might be an immaterial commodity, but a newspaper is very much an industrial good.

Paper production fundamentally structured the newspaper industry. In the first half of the nineteenth century, paper was manufactured largely from cotton rags, an expensive process and one ill-suited to the kind of durable but relatively disposable paper that newspapers needed. By the late nineteenth century, however, new industrial processes meant that paper could be produced from wood pulp. In the case of newsprint, Canadian spruce trees were ideal. American publishers worked first to eliminate tariffs on the importation of Canadian paper products and then built their own paper mills in places like Niagara and Quebec’s distant North Shore. The Tribune Company would build a thriving and profitable company town during the 1930s and 1940s in Baie Comeau, Quebec. It was in Baie Comeau that the company would begin producing other commodities derived from paper by-products, such as artificial vanilla and aluminum (excess energy generated by the Tribune Company’s dams was perfect for aluminum production).

Throughout Dead Tree Media, we find the contents of newspapers and the industrial process of newsprint production shaping each other. For instance, editorial pages railed against the “Paper Trust” when publishers sought the reduction of tariffs on Canadian newsprint. This led to
an amusing irony: editorial pages would later lament American newspapers’ dependence on foreign newsprint manufacturers. In the case of the Chicago Tribune, the paper’s editorial positions usually advanced company interests, but at times they conflicted. The Tribune’s isolationism early in World War II created policy challenges in Canada, as policymakers and the public wondered why they were producing a paper hostile to Canada’s wartime goals.

Stamm’s book makes two key contributions to business history. The first is an exploration of the relationship between public policy and private enterprise. As Stamm observes, “government policies in the United States and Canada created the incentives and infrastructures to serve a continental market for newsprint, and the US newspaper was a direct beneficiary of policies relating to tariffs, forestry, hydroelectric power generation, and canal building” (p. 290). Newspapers actively shaped policy, but they were also beholden to policymakers’ goals and interests. For instance, when Maurice Duplessis became premier of Quebec in the 1930s, he demanded increased payments for access to the province’s forests. Despite this initial tension, Duplessis and McCormick eventually found common cause—united in part by a shared anti-communism—and the Tribune Company proved itself able to cooperate with Canadian governments across the political spectrum.

The other key contribution to business history is Stamm’s textured examination of the dynamics of vertical integration. In the case of the Chicago Tribune, we find a long process of vertical integration across the first three-quarters of the twentieth century that brought the Tribune Company into a variety of industries and underpinned the company’s economic might. In an amusing passage, Stamm describes a company banquet at which a variety of products, edible and inedible, were produced from newsprint by-products. However, the company’s sprawling holdings would become a source of weakness in the 1980s as the paper business entered decline. Late in the story we see the Tribune Company broken into pieces and sold. This discussion is fascinating, though I was hoping for a broader discussion of the arc of this story. The mid-twentieth-century embrace of vertical integration is logical, but an exploration of the reasons why it no longer worked in the late twentieth century, and perhaps why it is less common today, would have made the book even stronger.

Finally, the book makes an important contribution to North American history. Stamm’s work is a wonderful example of transnational history and a sign that historians of the United States need to engage more fully with Canadian history. We see the American newspaper industry structured by access to, and debates about, Canadian natural resources. Similarly, interactions between newspaper companies and
Canadian federal and provincial officials shaped North American trade policy and Canadian economic development. This was a story with long-term implications: Brian Mulroney, Canadian prime minister during the crafting of the 1988 Canada–United States Free Trade Agreement, was born in Baie Comeau to an employee of the Tribune Company paper mill. Stamm’s book is transnational history at its finest, following the threads of the Tribune Company’s story wherever they go.

*Dead Tree Media* is a fascinating and thorough account of the rise and fall of the industrial newspaper. It is also a story with ongoing parallels. Stamm observes that “we are living through a historical moment in media history defined not by de-objectification or de-materialization, but rather by re-objectification and re-materialization” (p. 291). We might think production no longer matters in the age of “the cloud” and Internet-only publications, but that would repeat our mistaken assumptions about the industrial newspaper. We no longer need to think about paper mills in Baie Comeau to understand our news, but Stamm reminds us that we might do well to think a bit more about factories in places like China and Malaysia that produce the goods keeping our digital age decidedly material.


Reviewed by Shelton Stromquist

Lane Windham tells a compelling and, in many ways, fresh story of union organizing in the 1970s. While the arc of the story is not entirely new, its shape—a higher peak and steeper slope—offers a different perspective on what some historians have regarded as “the last days of the working class” (Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* [2010]). Windham sees not decline or extinction in the 1970s but working-class rebirth in a surge of organizing led primarily by African American workers and women. The record is mixed. But what sets this study apart is both the originality of its general argument and the fine-grained local studies that complicate the broader story she seeks to tell.