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Review of Doherty, Little Lindy is Kidnapped

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Thomas Doherty: *Little Lindy is Kidnapped: How the Media Covered the Crime of the Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 276 pp. \$27.95 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-0-231-19848-6.

Reviewed by Philip M. Glende (Independent Scholar)

In the early decades of the twentieth century, newspapers were the unchallenged leaders in providing news reports to the American public. Newspaper competition within cities was common and lively. But the 1930s were hard times for newspapers, too. Market forces propelled the industry inexorably toward concentration and consolidation. Newspapers also faced a threat to their role as the purveyors of daily news, as radio and newsreels became media competitors able to deliver sound and oral accounts and, two decades before television, moving pictures, from major news events.

Thomas Doherty situates this dramatic change in the media landscape within the story of the sensational kidnapping and murder of the child of Charles and Anne Lindbergh, the famous ocean-crossing aviator and his wife, also a celebrated aviator. In *Little Lindy is Kidnapped: How the Media Covered the Crime of the Century*, Doherty documents how radio and newsreels offered competition for timely news updates and exclusives in the long-running story. Doherty makes no effort to examine whether Bruno Hauptmann committed the crime or whether he could have acted alone even if he did do it. Instead, Doherty focuses on how the media – newspapers, radio, and newsreels – covered the crime, capture, and conviction of Hauptmann, who was executed.

Doherty opens with a prologue reminding modern-day readers that Lindbergh's solo flight of the *Spirit of St. Louis* across the Atlantic in 1927 made him a national celebrity. He received a hero's welcome and ticker tape parade in New York. Radio covered his Washington visit with a moment-by-moment account carried via a 52-station hookup. Newsreel cameras with sound recording equipment captured his takeoff from Roosevelt Field in New York and President Calvin Coolidge's remarks on his return. Cameras also recorded his appearance at the U.S. Embassy in Paris. The footage was shipped back on a fast ocean liner for distribution into movie theaters. After the initial hoopla, Lindbergh continued to fly, and his life was, Doherty notes, now part of the public domain. He married Anne Spencer Morrow in 1929 and a year later the couple had a son, Charles Lindbergh Jr.

After the prologue, Doherty picks up a chronological account of the kidnapping, inept police response, the ransom payment, discovery of the body, capture of Hauptmann, his trial and conviction. Although Doherty concentrates mainly on media coverage of the

news, he provides enough detail on the crime to ground the reader unfamiliar with the kidnapping and the events that followed. The story begins the evening of March 1, 1932, when the 19-month-old baby is discovered missing from his crib. The nursery was on the second floor of the Lindbergh's secluded home near Hopewell, N.J. Outside, police found a crude ladder. New Jersey State Police issued the bulletin at 10:46 p.m., and within minutes the news was flashed on wire service machines. Radio carried the news within an hour. Newsboys were on the streets before midnight hawking extra editions. Doherty notes that kidnapping, "the snatch racket," was common in the early 1930s and that there was some comfort in knowing what to expect next. "Yet little about the Lindbergh case played out according to script," Doherty wrote. "Cruel hoaxes, oddball characters, bungling investigators, red herrings and blind alleys, suspects and leeches, crime bosses and low-level thugs, and innocents caught in the backwash would sidetrack the linear trajectory before the final stop shattered all hopes for a happy ending" (21).

For Doherty, how the story was covered was every bit as remarkable as the crime itself. Both radio and newsreels matured into competitive news outlets during the hunt, capture, and punishment. Newspapers treated the story with the same competitive zeal, but now they were no longer alone. As it is today, crime was a news staple. Journalists rushed to the scene, literally within the hour of the first report in the case of Laura Vitray, a reporter for the *New York Evening Journal*, one of the city's 12 daily newspapers. Well-known journalists, such as Walter Winchell, Arthur Brisbane, and Will Rogers all claimed a piece of the action, but, Doherty notes, the majority of day-to-day coverage provided throughout the nation was produced by the generally byline-free big three wire services: Associated Press, Scripps-Howard's United Press, and Hearst's International News Service. "Beats," or being first with a report, even by minutes, was the stuff of celebration and bragging for the wire services, and the mentality fed a hunger for new details. The spirit of the newsroom was captured just a year earlier in the release of movie *The Front Page*. But this was a crime involving national hero Charles Lindbergh and his baby. The press was atypically restrained. "Frenzy in the newsroom there was, but the usual unbridled glee in covering a juicy story was absent," Doherty notes. "By all accounts, the hard-boiled cynics were no less heartsick and gut-punched than their readers" (43).

Radio, meanwhile, came into its own and surpassed print as the go-to medium for hot news. Radio technology had matured by 1932 to the point that live broadcasts were possible from almost anywhere. Listening sets were now commonplace in homes, with 15 million receivers serving some 50 million listeners, making radio the sixth largest industry in the United States. And no amount of will, expertise, or expenditure by newspapers

could deliver breaking news faster than radio. "No extra edition of a newspaper – whose contents had to be typed on a clunky Underwood typewriter, typeset, composited, printed, distributed, and hawked by newsboys – could outpace the speed of electricity," Doherty wrote (50). The Lindbergh case, Doherty argues, proved radio's potential as a news medium and set the stage for live coverage in the years ahead. The early stars will be familiar to broadcast historians: Lowell Thomas on the NBC Network and H.V. Kaltenborn on CBS were already household names before the kidnapping. The case also made Boake Carter a familiar radio voice for the rest of the 1930s.

Newsreels camera operators and sound technicians also rushed to Hopewell, as the Lindbergh case became the first long-running story covered independent of the newspapers. Newsreels were standard features during motion picture showings, with five companies, Fox Movietone News, Paramount Sound News, Hearst Metrotone News, RKO-Pathe News, and Universal Newspaper Newsreel, providing eight- to ten-minute features updated twice a week. By the early 1930s, two New York theater houses, the Embassy Newsreel Theatre on Times Square, and the Trans Lux on Broadway, played newsreels exclusively. Newsreels offered viewers sound and pictures to tell a story, though the limitations imposed by the bulky equipment made it unlikely newsreel cameras would be at the scene of the action while news was still occurring, unless it was speech or some other scheduled event. The Lindbergh case provided newsreel producers the chance to be in on a high-interest breaking news story. A crew from Universal arrived in Hopewell only hours after the first bulletin. By dawn, more than 50 newsreel camera operators, sound technicians, and others were on the scene with more than a dozen sound trucks ready for first light. Newsreel producers convinced Lindbergh to hand over home movie footage of the boy. The footage was converted from 16 mm to 35 mm for theatrical play, a first, and distributed widely.

After opening chapters on news of the crime itself, Doherty follows the news media -- newspapers, radio, and the newsreels -- as they covered the ransom payment, the discovery of the dead child not far from the Lindbergh home, the arrest of Hauptmann, his trial, conviction, and execution. Doherty writes with a flair that makes reading *Little Lindy is Kidnapped* a pleasurable experience. Of the intermediary John Condon, who called himself Jafsie: "Dr. Condon had an opinion on everything and the firm belief that everyone wanted to hear it" (22). On radio's edge over newspapers on breaking news: "No matter how hot off the presses, the news had cooled by the time it hit the streets" (50). On newsreel cameras showing and staging reporters and commentators at work: "When news was scarce, journalists were learning to make news by reporting on themselves" (74).

Although the book is about the crime and how it was covered, Doherty also notes Lindbergh's later embrace of Nazi Germany, his anti-Semitism, and his role in the America First Committee, which extolled nativism and isolationism even as the United States was being drawn into the European war.

To this reader, Doherty might have done more to support the claim that this crime was a transformative event for the news media. The dust jacket, perhaps more the work of the publishing house than the author, suggests the Lindbergh case "set the template for how the media would treat breaking news ever after." True, the news media was now no longer just the newspaper press, but the book demonstrates print, broadcast, and newsreel journalists were all chasing the same story in the same way. Still, overall *Little Lindy is Kidnapped* is informative and enjoyable. Doherty's book could fit nicely on a syllabus for a class in 20th century U.S. media history.