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Reliable Sources: 100 Years at the National Press Club

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By Edward C. Pease,
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Walter Cronkite once observed that journalists are a lot more self-critical than normal people. "I don't think there's any profession or occupation today that spends more time looking at its own navel than we do," he said.

Why? Perhaps it's because journalists are the watchdogs, driven to examine everything—so why not themselves and what they do?

As newspapers and their readership wither, it's hard not to be navel-gazers. It is journalists' (and their academic cousins') responsibility to gaze. Who? Where? When? Why? and, for goodness' sake, What? will (and should) "news" look like a year or ten from now? And How? will we deliver it? How will we do our jobs as journalists and as teachers and scholars? And, most important, how informed will be the citizens who are required for participatory democracy?

JMCQ sponsored a panel at the annual AEJMC convention in Boston this summer that asked, "Does J/MC Research Matter?" The question is not entirely tongue-in-cheek. Certainly, our research always should "matter" for more than T&P and vita-hits, especially as traditional news media—newspapers, of course, but also serious TV news—become less "mass" and reach fewer people. But is journalism to become nothing more than 140-character Twittering? If it is, what will be the fate of our research?

And what of books, the "media's" ancient forebears, whose authors have the outdated luxury of taking the time and space to report and reflect thoughtfully on our field and on its serious research? Are books also pitifully outdated and doomed in the cyber-age?

No. Not if this latest set of reviews is any indicator. True, it still takes months and even years to get from an idea to book form, even in these days of hyper-publishing. But the ideas explored in this issue's books stand up well to the time it has taken to conceive, write, and release them in dead-tree form. We also review a DVD "book" here for the first time and other works that increasingly fold in new and social media to the larger mix.

Ideas, well developed, don't tarnish easily, and the good ones grow with time. One's thinking process also profits from time and reflection—and greater-than-haiku length—that one can enjoy in writing and in reading a book. None of the ideas that drive the books in this issue would thrive in Twitter or Shrinklits.

Much of what we study and publish can at best nibble at the edges of the envelope of our common knowledge. As journalists and academics, we have the great luxury and license to mind other people's business, to conceptualize weird questions, and then to find ways to investigate them. It's hard work, as a recent president used to say, to look for what John Stuart Mill called the kernel of truth.

And although Papa Cronkite wasn't so sure, a little navel-gazing is not a bad thing—for journalists or societies—and that's what we do.