

*James Rorty*

OUR MASTER'S VOICE  
*ADVERTISING*

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

*Our Master's Voice: Advertising*, originally published in 1934 by the JOHN DAY COMPANY, is in the public domain

Published by MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS in the PUBLIC DOMAIN series

mediastudies.press | 414 W. Broad St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

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COVER DESIGN: Mark McGillivray

CREDIT FOR SCAN: Internet Archive, contributor Prelinger Library, 2006 upload

CREDIT FOR LATEX TEMPLATE: Book design inspired by Edward Tufte, by The Tufte-LaTeX Developers

ISBN 978-1-951399-00-9 (print) | ISBN 978-1-951399-01-6 (ebook)

DOI 10.21428/3f8575cb.dbb9917

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 202094177

*Edition 1 published in September 2020*

## PREFACE to the *mediastudies.press* edition

JAMES RORTY'S *Our Master's Voice* is buried treasure. The book set off tremors when published in 1934, perhaps because its author so decisively repudiated his former profession. But after the Second World War, Rorty and his spirited takedown of advertising fell into near obscurity. The scholarly literature that coalesced around "mass communication" in the early postwar decades makes almost no mention of the book. Popular treatments of advertising—like Vance Packard's 1957 best seller *The Hidden Persuaders*—neglect the book too.<sup>2</sup> And when *Our Master's Voice* does surface today, there's usually a filial explanation: The book tends to appear in biographical sketches of Rorty's far more famous son, Richard.<sup>3</sup>

So no one reads James Rorty anymore. This is too bad, since the book remains remarkably spry eighty-five years after its first printing. In fact, Rorty's dissection of the ad business has fresh things to say to scholars of Google-style "surveillance capitalism." The good-natured urgency of Rorty's prose resonates too—maybe especially because his aim to bury the "ad-man's pseudoculture" proved a spectacular failure. We can, in 2020, pick up where Rorty left off.

Thus *Our Master's Voice* is the right book to inaugurate our Public Domain series. It is, of course, in the public domain, having lapsed out of copyright in 1962. But that copy-freedom is just the book's baseline qualification: We are, at *mediastudies.press*, looking to republish works that cling to relevance, even if they've long since fallen out of print. An even narrower wedge of books stands out, like *Our Master's Voice*, for their unmerited banishment from the field's memory. Such books—unheralded for no good reason—are what we have in mind for the new series.

The Public Domain project has a pair of inspirations. The first is the University of Chicago Press's long-running Heritage of Sociology series, established by Morris Janowitz in the early 1960s on his return to Chicago. The first handful of volumes were devoted to prominent figures in what was, by then, known as the "Chicago School."<sup>4</sup> But the series grew more catholic over time, with volumes devoted to

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<sup>2</sup> Vance O. Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: McKay, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Neil Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), chap. 1.

<sup>4</sup> In his history of the Chicago department, Andrew Abbott called Janowitz "the most industrious retrospective creator of the first Chicago school" and a "self-appointed prophet of the past"—all on the strength of the Heritage series. Andrew Delano Abbott, *Department & Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 18–19.

scholars—Kenneth Burke and Martin Buber—far beyond the orbit of Chicago or even sociology itself.

That ecumenical spirit also animates the second inspiration for the Public Domain series, a 2004 reader titled *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919–1968*, edited by John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson.<sup>5</sup> The tome (and it really is one) collects almost seventy excerpts and reprints of media-related reflection. What unites a 1919 Sherwood Anderson short story and, say, the obscure 1959 study “The Social-Anatomy of the Romance-Confession Cover Girl”? These texts—and the other entries in the anthology—all offer sedimented reflections on what was a then new panoply of mass mediums. “These observers,” Peters and Simonson write,

hold unique historical positions as part of the first generations to live with commercially supported, national-scope broadcast technologies. They are at once informants, ancestors, and teachers. As informants, they tell us about experiencing and studying ‘mass communication’ as a generation new to it. As ancestors, they speak languages we recognize but in dialects different than our own. As teachers, their role is more complex. Often they speak with more clarity and conceptual insight than do the journals and books of our own day, and thus they teach by precept and example. At other times, they display their blind spots, weaknesses, or arrogance in such a way that we either swear never to follow their lead or perhaps see something better because of their failure.<sup>6</sup>

The editors sifted through their candidate texts—“blowing dust off bound volumes”—with an eye for works that have something to say to the present.<sup>7</sup> This is our aim too. We endorse, moreover, the view that a work’s warrant for attention may take a variety of forms. A jarring anachronism may merit a reader as much as, or more than, a still apposite line of reasoning.

Peters and Simonson fault media and communication research for its “rather pinched view of the past,” and position their anthology as a recovery project for the field’s forgotten pluralism.<sup>8</sup> In the same spirit, this Public Domain series seeks to ventilate the field’s memory of itself.

On the model of *Our Master’s Voice*, then, we plan to re-publish works that:

1. are in the public domain;
2. promise contemporary relevance; and yet,
3. have settled into obscurity.

The first criterion constitutes an undeniable limitation, but an important one. We are committed to open access (OA) on principle, so

<sup>5</sup> John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919–1968* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Peters and Simonson, *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Peters and Simonson, *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*, 495. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the editors included an excerpt from *Our Master’s Voice*: “The Business Nobody Knows,” 106–9.

<sup>8</sup> Peters and Simonson, *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*, 8.

charging readers to cover copyright fees isn't an option for us. Fortunately, all works published in the United States before 1924 are already in the public domain. What's less well known is that many books published between 1924 and 1963 are also owned by the public. Before the Copyright Renewal Act of 1992 made renewal automatic, copyright holders were required to file for an extension before their twenty-eight-year initial term ran out. Books published in 1964 were up for renewal when the 1992 law passed, so they (and all subsequent published works) remain intellectual property—and will stay locked for a long time.<sup>9</sup> The good news is that up to 80 percent of the copyright holders that published between 1924 and 1963 failed to renew—so those works are now owned by the public.<sup>10</sup> *Our Master's Voice* falls into that category: Rorty and/or the John Day Company, the volume's publisher, did not file for renewal, thus the copyright lapsed.

So our Public Domain books are on the open web and—crucially—they're discoverable. We assign a new ISBN for each reprint, DOIs for each chapter, and otherwise work to ensure that the volumes show up in library, OA directory, and web searches. Because they're digital, *Our Master's Voice* and other volumes in the series are easy to search and excerpt. Our underlying PubPub platform—nonprofit and open source—adds public annotation, citation formatting, and a robust array of auto-generated download options. We include a high-quality scan of the corresponding originals, in all their sepia-and-Baskerville glory. Corrections and updates are simple to make, since there's no fixed version of record.

Major advantages thus adhere to our web-based model of open publishing. Like the Heritage of Sociology series, we commission freshly written introductions to contextualize the republished work. But we sidestep the copyright muck, and the costs passed on to readers. The Peters and Simonson volume includes four dense pages of small-print permissions—and it's priced accordingly, out of reach for most readers.<sup>11</sup>

Rorty, back in 1934, summarized *Our Master's Voice* as “an attempt, by an advertising man and journalist, to tell how and why the traditional conception and function of journalism has lapsed in this country.” The book describes “the progressive seizure and use, by business, of the apparatus of social communication in America.”<sup>12</sup> Eighty-five years later, and we are still domiciled.

Jefferson Pooley  
Bethlehem, PA

<sup>9</sup> The best book on the corporate enclosure of public knowledge remains James Boyle, *The Public Domain: Enclosing the Commons of the Mind* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), which is, fittingly, *free to download*.

<sup>10</sup> Sean Redmond, “U.S. Copyright History, 1923–1964,” *New York Public Library Blog*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/05/31/us-copyright-history-1923-1964>.

<sup>11</sup> Peters and Simonson, *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*, 519–23.

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, *Our Master's Voice*, ix.