



# The Voice of America: Lowell Thomas and the Invention of 20th-Century Journalism

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Stephens, Mitchell

**The Voice of America: Lowell Thomas and the Invention of 20th-Century Journalism**

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Lowell Thomas, the radio pioneer, fabricated an interview as a *Chicago Daily Journal* reporter, resulting in a libel suit. He took his mother and sister on a lavish junket of the West, traveling by rail and staying in top hotels, on the promise he would publish promotional articles for the railroad companies. Few articles appeared. Thomas lied about key aspects of his reporting about British Col. T. E. Lawrence in World War I and is partly responsible for the myth of Lawrence of Arabia.

Amid these glaring flaws, Thomas “deserves a significant part of the credit for the journalism that came into being in American in the twentieth century,” writes Mitchell Stephens in *The Voice of America: Lowell Thomas and the Invention of 20th-Century Journalism* (5). It is a bold claim. Yet the tension between Thomas’s ethical transgressions and his contributions to modern journalism makes Mitchell’s account a fascinating read for ethicists and historians exploring broadcasting, media technology, and popular culture. Stephens, a New York University journalism professor and author of the comprehensive *A History of News* (Oxford University Press 2007), provides a critical review while also praising the late broadcaster’s enormous talents and innovations. This is an entertaining and readable account tracing Thomas’s career from his work as a cowboy, as a Chicago news reporter, and as a faculty member at Princeton University to his dominance as an

early radio broadcaster in the 1930s and 1940s. Students, journalism scholars, and cultural historians alike will find this story both enjoyable and thought-provoking.

Stephens uses a mix of archival research, interviews, and shoe-leather reporting to retrace Thomas’s extensive global travels and to memorably illustrate Thomas’s ability to network with the leaders of his day, from former President Franklin Roosevelt to Herbert Hoover, who was in line with the journalist’s political leanings. Stephens devotes significant time to Thomas’s reporting on Lawrence, whom the journalist met in 1918, shortly after British troops liberated Jerusalem from the Ottoman Empire. Thomas and cameraman Henry A. Chase proceeded to film Lawrence—a blue-eyed beardless British officer dressed in traditional Arab robes—during an expedition into the desert. Thus, the myth of Lawrence of Arabia was born, which Stephens blames in part on Thomas, in part on Lawrence, and in part on some of Lawrence’s colleagues. What critics failed to realize, Stephens argues, was the pathbreaking nature of Thomas’s reporting on Lawrence: “He was remarkable for his ability to shine a light into a fascinating and historically important corner of the war that was being overlooked by Americans and Europeans at the time” (100). Thomas essentially launched a start-up venture, with Chicago investors financing a multimedia reporting project, something unheard of in World War I. Thomas was so far ahead of his time that there was not even a means to distribute the mix of narration, slides, music, and film he and Chase captured (some of which was shot from airplanes); news reels had not yet been invented. Thomas, a veteran lecturer of travelogues, presented his reports from the stage of the Royal Opera House and Royal Albert Hall in London to sellout crowds. Some two million people saw Thomas’s show about Lawrence, and the subsequent best-selling book on the episode was printed in twenty-seven editions.

Thomas’s flawed presentation of Lawrence speaks to issues still

plaguing the news media today: Thomas “set out to fill the hero vacuum” (112) and offered an “it-takes-a-British-man theory of history” (113). Worse, Thomas led audiences to believe he was near combat when that was not the case. “He had not witnessed any engagements of any sort with the enemy or its railroad in the Middle East,” Stephens writes. “He fabricated. He lied” (125). Perhaps we see the template for distorted war coverage later on, such as the myth surrounding the rescue of US Pvt. Jessica Lynch in Iraq in 2003 (Joseph W. Campbell, *Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism*, University of California Press 2016, p. 179) or NBC anchor Brian Williams’s false claims of being under enemy fire in the 2003 Iraq war (Ernie Gates, “Stripes Resisted Feeding Frenzy after Breaking Brian Williams Story.” *Stars and Stripes*, February 11, 2015). This tension between a journalist’s innovations and transgressions transforms the Lowell Thomas biography into a multidimensional tale about the troubled origins of modern US journalism and its challenges looking ahead.

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**Happier?: The History of a Cultural Movement That Aspired to Transform America**

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When did our happiness turn into just one more task? Until quite recent times, happiness was accidental: a gift of our inborn temperament or the fortunate turn of chance. Now the state is pursued with ruthless precision, through multifaceted happiness projects in which yoga, decluttering, charity work, sexual experimentation, daily journaling, legumes, and family quality time are all deployed in an attempt to capture the elusive emotion and make