

BOOK REVIEW

Political journalism

New challenges, new practices

RAYMOND KUHN & ERIK NEVEU

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REVIEWED BY **Nelson Traquina**

This book edited by Raymond Kuhn, Senior lecturer at the University of London, and Erik Neveu, Professor of Political Science at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Rennes, is a stimulating addition to the already vast literature on political communication and contains contributions from academics from Great Britain, France, Italy, Holland, the United States and Australia, including noted scholars such as Jeremy Tunstall, Brian McNair and Theodore Glasser, to name just a few. With the exception of two chapters, all the contributions to the book emerged from a workshop on political journalism held at the University of Copenhagen in April 2000.

The book opens with two articles that map the terrain of political journalism and offer a historical backdrop, asking the question of how has political journalism changed, especially since the 1960s, and ends with a provocative essay by Tunstall entitled "Trends in news media and political journalism". The book is divided into three parts: the first consists of four contributions which address problems of interdependence between journalists and politicians in three countries (Great Britain, Italy and Thailand) and the European Union headquarters in Brussels; the second part consists of three contributions that examine the much debated question of the rise of a more cynical coverage of politics; and the third part consists of two chapters that focus on the implications for democracy.

Kuhn and Neveu state in their opening chapter "Political journalism: Mapping the terrain" that the book uses the subject of political journalism as "a starting point to improve our knowledge of the visible and the unseen in the functioning of the public sphere and the political communication environment" (p.1). The authors add that no other kind of journalism has been the subject of so much research but point out that this vast literature contains "blind spots", notably a lack of long-term

historical analyses as well as little comparative research that focuses on the peculiarities of political journalism in relation to other specialist output, such as sports or crime news. In Chapter 2, Neveu endeavours to address the lack of historical analyses by developing a historical analysis of political journalism in terms of four “generations” of political journalism since the late eighteenth century.

Part One of the book is entitled “The cross-management of the interdependencies between journalists and politicians. In Chapter 3, Raymond Kuhn offers a case study analysis of political journalism during the first Blair government and points to the growing influence of spin-doctors; the author also offers a critical examination of the concept of “primary definers”. In Chapter 4, Franca Roncarolo, an Associate Professor at the University of Turin, Italy, offers a case study analysis of the interdependencies between the state and politicians on the one hand and the media on the other, and underlines the importance of journalistic culture. In Chapter 5, Duncan McCargo, Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Leeds, provides the only contribution that examines political journalism in a developing country, Thailand. In Chapter 6, Olivier Baisnee, a doctoral student based at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques in Rennes, examines political journalism as it is practised by the 800 journalists that cover the European Union, reminding us that journalism is not only a job but a milieu through his ethnographic approach.

As Kuhn and Neveu point out in their opening chapter, most of the academic research on journalism since the 1960s has emphasised the potentially negative effects of the coverage of politics. Part II of the book is entitled “Towards a cynical coverage of politics?” In Chapter 7, Rodney Tiffen, Associate Professor in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney, examines the rise of scandal in Australian journalism. In Chapter 8, Veronique Pujas, a research fellow at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques in Grenoble, offers a cross-national comparative analysis (France, Italy and Spain) of the contamination of haemophiliacs by contaminated blood. In Chapter 9, Kees Brants, Director of the MA programme in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam, and Hetty Van Kempen, also based at the University of Amsterdam, make a summary of what they term the “spiral of cynicism” thesis and directly challenge the critical approach before examining political journalism in Holland.

Are the current changes in political journalism an opportunity for, or a threat to, the healthy functioning of representative democracy? The third part of this book is concerned with providing an answer to this

question. In Chapter 10, Brian McNair, from the University of Sterling, examines the impact of political journalism on contemporary democracy in Great Britain and criticizes the critical paradigm by noting that the public sphere has expanded exponentially in the final years of the twentieth “as multi-channel and digital communication technologies were introduced to mass consumer markets comprised of highly-educated, choice-rich citizens with unprecedented access to the new technologies of information and communication” (p. 193). McNair quotes the North-American academic John Pavlik who wrote that “news junkies have never had it so good”. In Chapter 11, entitled “Repositioning the newsroom: the American experience with ‘public journalism’”, Theodore Glasser, Professor of Communication at the University of Stanford, and Francis L. F. Lee, a doctoral student at Stanford University, examine the public journalism movement in the United States, concluding that the press deserves special protection from the state not because journalists have a right to be heard but because citizens have a right to hear. In the final chapter of the book, the eminent Jeremy Tunstall writes that while world politics have been greatly transformed in recent decades, the media, including political journalism, may have changed even more. In an increasingly globalised media landscape, Tunstall stresses the need to understand political journalism at various, intermediary levels and to establish linkages between distinct sub-fields of academic research levels. The British sociologist’s final assertion, or hypothesis, is that Western Europe, and not the United States, is the true leader in supplying news around the world. That controversial statement may be a provocative way to entice the reading of this welcome contribution to the study of journalism.

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