
It is unusual to discover a unique and imaginative introductory textbook that covers Canadian mass media. But Augie Fleras has managed to accomplish the difficult task of providing a detailed sociological perspective on the media, its institutions, and their effects on Canadian society in his book Mass Media Communication in Canada.

Although this textbook is clearly written from a sociological viewpoint, Fleras is quick to acknowledge other paradigms, and almost any instructor would find it easy to use. There is no question the author is especially interested in media effects and portrayals of minorities. For those interested in exploring these areas in detail in first- and second-year courses, this book will be invaluable.

But those instructors desiring a detailed structural analysis of Canadian media institutions will not be disappointed either. This book contains all the elements necessary for use in an introductory course with theoretical material on news framing and media processes. Fleras also understands how media have changed, especially when he urges the reader to de-massify the mass media. “The concept of mass no longer means what it did in the past. Media communication is rarely aimed at large and dispersed aggregates” (pp. 38-39). Fleras uses this critical approach when examining issues such as concentration of ownership in media and institutions such as the Canadian film industry, the CBC, and the CRTC. All of these areas are covered thoroughly and extremely effectively, with up-to-date information and examples.

Fleras also includes a discussion of advertising, which is always an area of interest to students taking introductory courses. But the treatment of this area is substantive. There is a warning against taking an overly critical approach, but also a suggestion that viewing advertising in a wider context can be very revealing. “The ideologies that are embedded within advertising say a lot about society in terms of what is acceptable or desirable” (p. 172).

For the most part, students will find this book a challenging but enjoyable read. It does an excellent job of connecting Marshall McLuhan's work to contemporary media effects. Fleras displays a refreshingly astute knowledge of McLuhan's contributions to the field and applies it more effectively than most other introductory textbooks. The author sprinkles references to McLuhan throughout the textbook. The relatively brief commentary contained in this book may do more to unpack McLuhan's work for first-year students than most other readings exclusively focused on the subject.

The author also does an admirable job of capturing the contradictions inherent in any kind of critical study of the media. Consider the way Fleras handles a controversial topic by challenging a traditional perception. “Censorship is a routine and normal component of human interaction rather than a negative and isolated interruption in the flow of communication,” writes Fleras. “The key issue revolves around where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable, who decides, and on what grounds” (p. 12).

The book, although very well organized, does provide a discussion of convergence very early on, which may actually allow students to become engaged with the material sooner. A sociological approach provides a unique perspective when it comes to examining the potential impact of the Internet. This book's treatment of new media may serve as a nice counterbalance to more traditional approaches that dominate the literature.

Students will especially enjoy and be able to relate to the detailed case studies throughout the book, which provide a terrific marriage of theory and practice. These case studies cover a wide range of topics and capture the subtlety and nuance that introductory textbooks often fail to provide. The biggest strength of these cases studies is their freshness. Fleras does an especially good job of critiquing media coverage during the anthrax crisis.
following the terrorist attacks on the United States. “The paradox is inescapable: in publishing articles that may spread panic to the point of paralysis, the media are indeed fortifying the terrorist agenda,” writes Fleras. “And terrorists could hardly have missed the message: the best way to frighten Americans is to scare the media first” (p. 69). Other case studies that look at how figure skaters Jamie Sale and David Pelletier were portrayed in the media during the 2002 Winter Olympics and a discussion of a television program devoted to the World Beer Games and the superficiality of the Oscar awards are likely to capture the interest of students.

At times, Fleras may overreach a bit, talking over the heads of the intended audience, which would likely be first- and second-year university students. Instructors using this book will probably find they have to provide explanations to complicated material that Fleras assumes the readers already understand, but may not. The author sometimes uses terms such as “false consciousness” and “hegemony” without providing a proper definition. But this is a relatively minor flaw, easily corrected by instructors. In fairness, though, Fleras also does an admirable job of introducing topics such as compression of the news cycle and imagined communities, which can be dealt with in greater detail in upper-year courses.

The only other problem with this textbook is that Fleras tends to pass off journalists’ opinions as those of academics. At least this is the perception that is created. He even uses print journalists to criticize the medium of television. Even though these opinions may have some validity, Fleras should take care to distinguish between the use of academic and journalistic sources, especially when he uses the latter to bolster his own arguments. It seems ironic that Fleras is attempting to critically examine the impact of the mass media, yet he uses the same mass media to make his point. This is especially ironic when he goes to considerable effort to discuss the importance of deconstruction and stepping outside of media to gain a better understanding. At times, he demonstrates the difficulty of such an approach, even if this is demonstrated more by accident than by design.

When it comes to introductory textbooks in mass communication, there is an abundance of material to choose from. Mass Media Communication in Canada may not be for all instructors, but it is certainly a textbook worth considering. It is a thorough and engaging work, skilfully organized and written. It is a book that scholars will enjoy as a teaching tool and one students should enjoy reading.

James Killingsworth  
Carleton University