

What factors most influence the selection of news frames? How are media texts and organizations related to (other) structures and relations of power? How should we evaluate the performance of news media in a democratic society?

These are some of the perennial but important questions raised by the two very different books reviewed here—Miljan and Cooper’s empirical survey of Canadian journalists’ attitudes, and Curran’s synthetic and evaluative essays overviewing debates in contemporary media studies.

But first, a confession: I am partly responsible for Hidden Agendas’ publication. Even though I have often critiqued research from the neo-liberal Fraser Institute’s “National Media Archive” (NMA), with which both authors have been long associated, I recommended (albeit with reservations) its publication to UBC Press. The primary research it reports constitutes an original contribution to Canadian media scholarship. Miljan & Cooper argue that journalists’ individual political values and opinions influence the selection and presentation of news in Canadian media, by contrast with (alleged) assumptions that ownership is the predominant influence. They inquire whether, compared to the Canadian population, journalists’ values are disproportionately “post-materialist,” concerned with rights, feminism, the environment, and other “new social movement” issues. On the basis of questionnaire surveys and content analyses, the authors compare journalists’ opinions on politics and media issues with, first, the opinions of a sample of the general public, and second, news coverage of unemployment, the partition of a post-independence Quebec, and Supreme Court decisions on social issues. The authors usefully question journalists’ claim to “objectivity” (without, however, problematizing the very concept or the professional practices that are assumed to operationalize it).

To be sure, methodological specialists may find much to question—the heavy analytical reliance on single and oblique survey questions, gaps and selective highlighting in the presentation of “findings” (including some that are statistically not significant and/or based on apparently small but unreported totals), the representativeness of the public sample (51% of the sample [p. 69], but only 37% of Canadians over 20, are under 40), or the decision to exclude journalists from more conservative smaller-market media (p. 67) but presumably to include residents from those same areas in the population sample.

Still, the actual findings are plausible, and in many respects remarkably unremarkable. (Sixteen pages are devoted to showing that coverage of unemployment emphasizes negative over positive news.) English-Canadian journalists in major urban media are better-educated, less religious, older, and more male than the general population. They are “materialist” on economic issues, generally supporting capitalism, with views balanced between left and right (an exception is the CBC, whose staff and coverage, the authors argue, are further to the left); their antipathy to Quebec separatism parallels that of their audiences; but on social issues such as gay or women’s rights, they have a relatively liberal or “post-materialist” orientation. (Surprisingly, there were no questions specifically on environmental or aboriginal issues, only the “respect” that should be accorded these groups.) Overall, they argue, news coverage “reflects” these orientations. In French Canada, both journalists and news coverage diverge less from their counterpart population than is the case in English Canada.

The authors are coy about the policy implications. Judging from the NMA’s track record as well as the emphases in this book, the authors arguably have their own “hidden
agenda” to identify journalists’ allegedly “post-materialist” values as not only a significant influence on news but also a potential problem for democracy, with the CBC particularly at fault, and to shift news discourse to the right—in the interests of “balance,” of course.

But while Miljan & Cooper do not mention the point, their results are not so drastically different from some of the “cultural criticism” they deride. A recent survey of American elite journalists’ attitudes (Croteau, 1998) found them to be liberal on social issues, but more conservative than the public on economic issues such as taxation and free trade—not surprising, given the urban and affluent social location of this group. Similarly, we at NewsWatch Canada have suggested (following Winn & McMenemy, 1976) that the under-representation of traditional views on religion or abortion in Canada’s major dailies, combined with the tilt toward conservative themes and think-tanks in economic news, suggests “an uneasy accommodation between the secular, largely urban, ‘liberal’ views of many journalists and the economically-conservative interests of media owners.... [J]ournalists are often ‘permitted’ to express liberal views on social or moral questions so long as they do not fundamentally or repeatedly challenge the core political and economic interests of media owners and the rest of the corporate elite” (Hackett & Gruneau et al., 2000, p. 225).

But before shelving Hidden Agendas as a worthy if unexciting confirmation of existing knowledge, we need to note some highly problematic aspects. First, the authors’ review in Chapter 1 of the literature on the relationship between power and media, which they use to contextualize their work, borders on travesty (and not mainly because they misconstrue my own 13-year-old summary of hegemony theory as my own position!). They conflate critical theory on the media, from structuralist political economy to instrumentalist elite control theories to radical cultural studies, into a single “cultural critics” paradigm. Miljan & Cooper largely disregard the broad range of concerns raised by “cultural critics,” concerns evident in Curran’s book—structural censorship through market relations and the commodification of information, the promotion of consumerism, the biases of news routines and values, the pressures of advertising and commercialism, reliance on elite sources, the translation of social into discursive inequalities, and much else.

Instead, Miljan & Cooper find mainly an obsession with the power of media owners to determine media content. And even here, they have a narrow focus: largely ignoring owners’ ability to “influence the ethos, direction and goals of [media] organizations through the setting of policy, the hiring and firing of key staff, and the allocation of rewards” (Curran, p. 149), Miljan & Cooper instead emphasize one question: can owners impose their political views on news content?

And finally, the authors claim that the “cultural critics” are uninterested in empirical evidence (p. 17) and do not support their case for media as ideological institutions (producing meaning in the service of domination, as Thompson, 1984, put it) with reference to “what is actually being said and by whom” (p. 22). Such an astonishing claim requires ignoring volumes of textual analyses in Canada over the past two decades, on news representations of labour, of ethnic and religious minorities, of social and economic issues, by scholars such as Graham Knight, myself, Karim H. Karim, Frances Henry and Carol Tator, NewsWatch Canada and many others—not to mention studies of the news context, such as the emergent “right-wing information infrastructure” in Canada’s media (Taras, 2001, p. 210). Such studies would qualify Hidden Agendas’ argument, but unlike Hitler’s Mein Kampf, they are almost absent from the 180 or so bibliographic references. The much more extensive American critical media scholarship is similarly ignored, while Miljan’s own reports for the NMA’s newsletter, and one or two other studies with conclusions they find compatible, are highlighted.

Whether hubris, ignorance, calculation, or mere space constraint is behind such selectivity, it is consistent with another failure of contextualization: the influences on news production. Hidden Agendas in effect sets up a contrast between just two variables—the
political views of journalists and of owners. In espousing the dominance of the former, Miljan & Cooper repeatedly imply causality from congruence: “The personal views of journalists were closely reflected in the stories they presented” (p. 135); “To predict how a news outlet will report on national unity issues, one need look no further than the language spoken by the reporter” (p. 144). But the data, aggregated at the level of news organizations, cannot correlate the views of individual journalists with the stories they personally cover; and the authors pay little heed to other possible explanations of aggregate congruence between journalists’ survey responses and news patterns—such as the socialization of journalists to entrenched newsroom cultures.

Moreover, the authors make the astounding claim that because news stories are dependent on individual journalists’ actions, “the issue of who owns the company, or how large those holdings may be, does not have a large—or even small—impact” (p. 175). Leaving aside the logical challenge of demonstrating such a universal negative, this claim flies in the face of other studies showing substantial differences between newspapers under different ownership—in coverage of labour, business, economic themes, policy institutes, and media corporations themselves, for instance (Hackett and Gruneau, 2000; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003). The authors’ under-theorization of ownership is “reflected” in the following two nearly sequential statements (p. 136): “Ownership has little to do with coverage of economic news.” “Public or private ownership of the media outlet does influence the coverage of economic issues.”

In short, while Hidden Agendas offers some interesting exploratory research, its overview of relevant media scholarship is hardly authoritative. Fortunately, such overviews do exist, and foremost among them is James Curran’s Media and Power. Focusing on historical, sociological, and political aspects of media, respectively, knitted together by the theme of power of, and power through, the media, most of the chapters are lightly revised updates of previously published landmark essays. An important exception is his incisive new essay (chapter 1) evaluating rival liberal, feminist, libertarian, cultural populist, anthropological/nation-defining, and radical/critical narratives of British media history; while these do not always translate directly into the Canadian context, the book is worth reading for this alone. His 1990 critique of the “new revisionism” of cultural and media studies (Chapter 4) is a reminder that Curran does not shrink from taking unfashionable stands, in this case against the cultural populist celebration of audience autonomy, in which he finds more than an echo of the earlier liberal-pluralist tradition that occluded crucial questions about power.

Space does not permit me to do justice to the book’s richness, but three themes are worth highlighting as a counterweight to the neo-liberal celebration of the market and denigration of public-service broadcasting underlying Hidden Agendas.

First, far from providing optimal diversity and freedom in public communication, the marketization of media can generate structural censorship and a narrowing of public discourse. Challenging conventional liberal histories (Chapter 3), Curran argues that the commercialization of the British press in the nineteenth century entrenched disproportionate influence for conservative and affluent interests in the media system, and contributed directly to the decline of a radical working-class press and culture. He later explores (pp. 226-231) why the neo-liberals’ “consumer sovereignty” justification for commercial media, that they give people “what they want,” does not work even on its own terms, as high entry costs and many other structural factors constrain consumer choice and influence.

Second, compared to Miljan & Cooper and notwithstanding his own radical and political economy commitments, Curran offers a more nuanced overview of the influences on media production. In his chapter on renewing the radical tradition, Curran identifies 11 factors that “encourage the media to support dominant power interests” (p. 148) and seven (such as non-elite collective action, progressive State policies, and journalists’ relative
autonomy) that can provide countervailing openings for popular voices and democratic change.

Third, Curran’s last two chapters offer a renewed rationale for public-service broadcasting, as a central component in a structurally pluralist media system, a component with a mandate to constitute a public forum and to offset the democratic deficits of commercially driven, corporate media. In the Canadian context, where the rationale for public broadcasting has sometimes been reduced to the cultural role of providing Canadian content, this democratic (political) mandate deserves re-emphasizing. Indeed, from this perspective, CBC journalism should be unabashedly “left-wing,” precisely in so far as it provides access to important citizen-relevant viewpoints marginalized by most corporate media.

If there is a gap in Media and Power, it concerns political strategies for implementing the democratic imperatives for media that Curran so clearly articulates. This is ironic, given his role in the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, which enjoyed influence in Britain’s Left, especially during the 1980s, as an advocate for media reform. (Curran has written elsewhere [2000] about the relative failure of press reform in Britain.) Still, this book deserves to be read not only by scholars and students looking for a masterful synthesis and evaluation of key debates in British media studies, but also by activists and citizens seeking antidotes to the market fetishism still dominating media policy discourse.

References

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