
Much commentary and debate among communication scholars with a critical orientation has focused on defining the dialectics between cultural studies and political economy. That debate focuses on how to integrate cultural studies concerns with the realities of media political economy. For example, Douglas Kellner writes, “it is important to challenge any previous established academic division of labour and to develop a transdisciplinary approach. A critical communication studies will thus overcome the boundaries of academic disciplines and will combine political economy, social theory and research, and cultural criticism in its project which aims at critique of domination and social transformation” (p. x, 1997). James Compton’s The Integrated News Spectacle is an admirable attempt at doing just that as he sets out to combine textual analysis, political economy, and critical theory to account for the changes in news presentation. What Compton terms the “integrated news spectacle” is the product of profound changes in the news industry as a result of an increasing emphasis on the bottom line over the last several decades.

Compton endeavours to rethink how journalism and entertainment have become so intermeshed and what the implications of this are for how well journalism serves its vital role in sustaining democratic dialogue and debate. Compton’s focus is on the tension between journalists and the traditional norms of news professionals and the pressure on journalists to serve larger corporate goals such as profitability, attracting desirable audience segments for advertisers and using news outlets to promote other products within the corporate “family.”

Compton presents a strong theoretical framework that uses the work of Guy Debord as a point of departure. While Debord’s notion of spectacle as a reformulation of Marx’s commodity fetishism serves as a base, Compton critiques some of Debord’s limitations such as the failure to connect the construction of news spectacles to the larger political economic concerns facing publishers, editors, and reporters of today’s news.

For Compton, the integrated spectacles that news presents are central to the business of journalism as they incorporate some degree of transposability by tapping into an audience’s widely shared themes of everyday life. These spectacles can then be repurposed across a number of media and media formats and serve as the basis for broader corporate strategies of marketing and capital accumulation.

The strongest sections of the book are where Compton sets out to map the history of a story/spectacle. He then uses these case studies to illustrate how media spectacles are born and how they are extended beyond the traditional news frame into the world of popular culture. Drawing on the narratives and presentations surrounding stories such as the death of Princess Diana, the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, and the instant mythology of the Jessica Lynch saga, Compton’s analysis is thorough and provides much evidence to support his theoretical framework.

But the smaller insights, such as the deconstruction of former wrestler turned politician Jessie Ventura, are appreciated as well. Ventura’s self styled image as an oppositional political figure is reframed by Compton as a self contained media spectacle merely casting itself as oppositional. That Ventura attracted a new segment of voters in his successful election as Governor of Minnesota speaks to the effectiveness of creating a media spectacle, which benefits more than specific political goals. The “added value” such political spectacles bring to the commercial news media represents the merging of an entertainment celebrity with the world of politics to provide a kind of crossover campaign which hits not only news programs but seeps into the larger popular culture. The election of Arnold Schwarzenegger would be another chapter in political spectacle divorced from political substance.
Throughout the book, Crompton points out the implications for democratic governance that result from centring news in a web of entertainment and promotional strategies. And as a former professional journalist, he is always careful to delineate what it means for the kind of work journalists are expected to do within this “spectacled” environment: “there is enough substantive evidence to suggest the underlying logic of promotional integration . . . runs contrary to the goal of public service—that is serving the individual and collective needs of citizens, not consumers” (p. 121).

Perhaps the only area where readers might be asking for more would be the contribution the public relations industry brings to the development and sustenance of a media spectacle over a story's life time. While there are areas in which this issue is raised, such as the Pentagon's creation of the myths surrounding the “rescue” of Jessica Lynch, it is certainly an issue that could be further developed as Compton's theoretical framework presents a series of significant questions on the role of the promotional arm of the media industrial complex in creating integrated news spectacles.

This book is a timely addition to the literature of critical news studies. While accessible to upper division undergraduates, its audience is primarily news scholars and those who seek to bridge the cultural studies/political economy divide.

References

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