
Researchers, activists, professionals, and citizens from around the world are trying to decipher the effects of the new consolidated and converged media environment. Case studies and historical accounts are often used to explain this new media experience. Converging Media, Diverging Politics is no different in this respect as it also provides a series of articles using these approaches. However, the underlying question of the book seeks a meaning that goes beyond understanding the mere media landscape of our times by exploring the role of news media in North American society.

This book is of particular interest to any scholar or student wanting to gain a better understanding of the Canadian and American political economy of news media at the beginning of the new millennium through well documented examples of power struggles and media reform alternatives. The fourteen chapters of the book are not formally circumscribed into particular themes or sections, but it seems the logical decoupage begins with a general explanation of the media landscape, followed by case study examples, a discussion of democracy and media reform, and ends with alternative means of developing and using media today.

Chapters 1 through 3 describe the trends in the media sphere including convergence, deregulation, and audience fragmentation. An historical approach was taken to explain the road leading to the current state of affairs, but the image portrayed is particularly bleak. Even though Skinner, Compton, and Gasher mention the Canadian reality show Star Académie (see p. 68-69) as an example of convergence realized, it is lost among full case studies on the negative effects of convergence, which include “Clear Channel” and “Aspergate” (see chapters 4 & 5). Considering the editors chose the question “What is journalism for?” as the main reference to inform every chapter in the book, one would have expected a more balanced approach. An alternative could have been to include a more detailed description of positive economic advantages of convergence or even better, a full chapter about Quebecor’s success of Star Académie. Unfortunately, the one-sided argument against convergence, and its effects is evident in most of the book, with the exception of chapter 7, which offers some opposing research perspectives.

One of the pitfalls of the book is the number of repeated explanations. If you read individual chapters, you would not be preoccupied by this issue, but if you read the book from cover to cover, many background facts are repeated such as the Kent Commission (see chapters 3 and 5) and the history behind Clear Channel (see chapters 4 and 10), which slows reading at times. References to previous chapters would have solved this problem and made this book more holistic rather than a sum of its parts. Much needed background information about certain politicians, particularly Americans (see for example chapter 9), and other media personalities are often omitted. For insiders or news junkies, name dropping may not be an issue, but for others, such as undergraduate students or foreign readers, it may be frustrating at times, because within a few years the people mentioned in
the articles may no longer be part of the political arena, which makes references to their duties and so-called “claims to fame” important to mention to ensure the book will transcend time and space.

Chapters 9 and 10 are complementary as they provide a useful reference to attempts at media reform and offer the perfect segue into the debate about the place of public interest using the in United States as an example. However, chapter 11 is not as well constructed. McVicker proposes a new philosophy for journalism schools as a gateway to media reform. This is an interesting subject to broach, but couching this discussion in the post 9/11 milieu does not answer the questions posed in previous chapters. Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to discuss the role of the journalist vis-à-vis new business models and power structures as presented in previous chapters rather than argue the need to have journalists act as citizens?

How objective would journalism be if it suddenly became principally synonymous to advocacy? The importance of independent journalists in the face of editorial struggles may be a more pressing issue for future journalists. Furthermore, this discussion should go beyond the American context. Discussing Columbia University’s new curriculum is far from satisfactory given some Canadian journalism programs have been addressing the need for more general knowledge based programs for years. Also, does a journalism degree need to be provided at the graduate level? Some institutions have made a general undergraduate degree mandatory prior to undertaking a journalism degree without it being offered at the graduate level thereby mirroring other disciplines such as law. Although the topic matter of chapter 11 should be commended, the real discussion about media reform and alternative movements on the road to a more democratic media landscape takes place in chapters 12 and 13.

Chapter 12 provides a historical account of community media in Quebec as an example of alternative media. In general it is a positive look on media as opposed to some of the previous chapters. Nonetheless, to suggest that “community media practices” manifest what is called the right to communicate today is contentious because the right to communicate is not a codified and claimable right and should not be limited to community media practices. Chapter 13 also provides a fundamental account of cyberactivism in the counterglobalization movement in Canada, but it is also broader in its perspective because it includes references to other countries in the world. It is a great introduction to this topic and a text to be considered when teaching this subject to undergraduates.

In conclusion, Converging Media Diverging Politics provides insight into key issues surrounding convergence in North America. It also provides a range of ways in which to discuss the role of journalism today, even though it is only a cursory glance at the possibilities. For those seriously considering the issue, readings about the Latin American situation would be beneficial to assess the entire American context, and additional readings on the Canadian perspective that go beyond Quebecor and CanWest would provide a more balanced view of the North American context. Although the book seeks to understand the role of journalism, perhaps the question posed is not the best summary of its contents as the topics introduced can be the springboards for a variety of other issues that are shaping today’s media sphere.

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