BOOK REVIEW

Edwin R. Black
Politics and the News: The Political Functions of the Mass Media
(Toronto: Butterworths, 1982)

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In Politics and the News, Edwin R. Black searches out the interstices of the political system for the elusive stuff that will help him redefine one of pressdom's hoariest myths: "the power of the press." While not eschewing the traditional and descriptive laundry-list of tensions between the press and government, e.g., news management, censorship, secrecy, etc. — Black's, after all, is an introductory work — the political scientist in him leads Black toward the functional categories of Gabriel Almond and James Coleman, especially political communication, for direction; hence, the subtitle, The Political Functions of Mass Media.

Drawing heavily on the rich legacy of newspapering and the more recent experiences of radio and television in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States, Black analyzes the public affairs problems facing the media in comparative fashion. This, of course, he cannot do with full justice in the allotted pages, so it is not surprising that the book reads less like a tightly - knit tract of nine chapters than a collection of musings — musings leavened by a touch of humor that academic writing could benefit from, but musings nonetheless.

Black's style bears the strong stamp of the journalist, which he was for ten years, and this, coupled with the academic world he turned
to following those years -- he is now professor of political science at Queen's University and the President of the Canadian Political Science Association for 1982 - 1983 -- has resulted in a readable, felicitous prose. Physically, the sans serif typeface suffers by comparison to its more elegant Roman cousin, but we have Butterworths to thank for trying to keep costs as low as possible in its recently-launched communication series, of which this is one, to deliver titles at a reasonable price. Among the various shortcomings, the two dozen or so typographical errors must stand out as the most galling, especially to a former journalist.

What appears as the book's main strength and weakness seem to spring from a single source, the desire to proceed unshackled by a framework. In the Preface, Black writes:

While not burdening you with surveys of all the latest academic research, the book does look at enough to suggest the extent to which the mass media play important political roles and to explore the reasons why they are not the political institutions our ideals lead us to expect. This is offered the reader free of the confusions which would attend any effort to marry it with development and presentation of an integrated theory of the political influence of the mass media. (vi)

Apology given, Black proceeds to blend commendably into the text well-known and well-documented research; this is decidedly a strength of the work, which also includes a very recent study he co-authored with Peter Snow, of the University of Western Ontario, on agenda-setting and which appeared in this Journal (Jan-
The study examined the newspaper-local government nexus in three Ontario cities — Kingston, Belleville and Peterborough — in typical agenda-setting fashion to discover whether the dailies and their readers shared similar perceptions of key civic issues and whether the newspapers affected the perception of significance. The findings, while far from conclusive, suggest the kind of work that may help in the job of refining the meaning of political communication in a media context.

The flexibility of approach allowing Black to incorporate this and other fine research throughout the book, alas, is bought at a price, that is, "free ... of an integrated theory." The delights of looking at individual trees — research items here, reporters workaday world there, political functions elsewhere — add up to a forest of musings that accounts for the main failing: no form. However far removed from "an integrated theory" — whose existence one might question in the first place — a framework is sorely needed to help reduce the discursiveness. At the risk of criticizing the book Black did not write, perhaps he could have used a simplified functional construct since the terminology used approvingly owes so much to Almond and Coleman.

A framework would have helped explain, among other things, why certain chapters followed others, why material that appeared misplaced was not, how the last chapter related to the preceding eight, or how political communication is connected with system well-being, this last a possible rationale for "The Struggle for Dominance." Incidentally, Black's debts to Almond and Coleman are to their seminal Politics of the Developing Areas (1960) whose functional nomenclature underwent change and refinement in two editions of Comparative Politics (1966, 1978) by Almond and C. Bingham Powell, Jr.
Two other concerns, more confusion than criticism, have to do with whether the mass media are social or political institutions, and audience analysis. The confusion regarding the first point arises in the Preface (also, pp. 5, 26, 47, 240, 241), and its clarification may be directly linked to a delineation of the concept of political communication. But, defined only as "data circulated in the political system" (p. 12), political communication shimmers just out of reach as the hardened master key that might unlock this puzzle and the bigger one of the press's power.

On the matter of the audience, Black describes it as the "one critical factor" neglected in much of the heated debate about the mass media (p. 149). One is not quite sure whether he may not be using overstatement to pedagogical effect, for the discussion that follows includes a wealth of research material supporting the opposite picture of audience analysis. Elsewhere (pp. 252, 255), Black makes claims that presuppose audience studies of a sophisticated nature.

Minor points reflecting more a matter of personal taste than substantive disagreement involve (1) the choice of examples (e.g., there is no mention, perhaps refreshingly so, of the role of the press in Watergate, although its exclusion overlooks one of the most traumatic political crises facing the United States; and no reference to the televising of the Canadian parliament, a major development in political communication); (2) silence about the frequency with which politicos and journalists seem to try to swap roles (e.g., the mayor of Calgary), and the legitimacy of reporters that allows them access to places and seemingly rude questioning of politicians that protocol prohibits government personnel from going or doing; (3) puzzlement about the statement that the mass media "have not been given extensive and systematic
attention you might expect" (p. 5); (4) next to nothing about press ethics; and (5) the lumping of editorial and advertising activities into a single category, e.g., citing Vance Packard who compiled material produced by others to package a book about advertising manipulativeness and suggesting that this as evidence of the more general media (editorial) manipulativeness (pp. 13 - 14).

Much of the preceding may be construed as complimentary, however backhanded it may sound, as they are reactions that Black avers he wants to provoke with his book. However, there is much to praise outright in his efforts as well. Aside from the aforementioned strengths, one must be thankful to him for putting together a primer that places a number of bewildering mass media activities into a Canadian - comparative political context highly accessible to introductory students. The value derives from the application of general propositions to specific Canadian frames of reference closest to the young reader who might otherwise miss the point of the propositions.

To the initiated, Black's examination of unexamined biases about the mass media (pp. 54 - 55) will come as an eye - opener, an instance of the aristotelian principle of "the tyranny of the majority" in our vaunted, liberal media. True to his contention that no framework contrived to analyze press performance is entirely free of its own biases, Black does not flinch from casting his skeptical gaze on cherished beliefs of the media nearest and, perhaps, dearest to us.

Other points worth noting because they tend either to get shunted aside as insignificant or trivial are Black's extended discussion of public opinion data, especially their shortcomings which often are downplayed in making a case for their value (p. 158, passim); and a minor tribute to the lowly publicity sheet, the handout,
which is the avowed bane of hot-shot editors and reporters too proud to admit how often it serves as a lead for stories or as a news item in its own right (p. 102).

There is much more to Politics and the News than the a review can include or comment on because its ambitious, sometimes curious, rambling nature is as various as the topics it treats. Black's contribution toward a new appreciation of "the power of the press" awaits further articulation, although it is a beginning in explicating "the real power of the mass media [which] is changing the whole of our political life while we, the chief actors or victims, remain largely unaware of the nature of the transforming force" (p. 1). The several reservations aside, it is a welcomed title that helps us appreciate press-public affairs as much more complex and continuously engaging than many imagine.