
BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by: Robert Lake, Mount Saint Vincent University.

"It was as if, suddenly, somebody had declared violent, anonymous war on women of the city where I live," wrote the editor of Quest magazine in September 1982. The city was Toronto, where over a six month period in 1982, the three Toronto daily newspapers (Sun, Star and Globe and Mail) published three hundred ninety-one items "the basic message of which was that Toronto had experienced a surge of violence against women" (page 5). Voundsakis and Ericson point out that police statistics did not support the media belief that violence against women had escalated abruptly. Indeed, one author attended a public meeting where the police reported that incidents of violent crime against women were roughly the same as in 1981. None of the three newspapers reported this the following day.

But in 1982 a number of sensational and tragic events (rapes, murders) did occur. These were linked together and coupled to other events (e.g., a shake-up in Toronto's homicide squad) to create a thematic agenda. In short, the "suddenness" of the war spotted by the editor of Quest was a media construction.

Voundsakis and Ericson undertook a content analysis of the three hundred ninety-one items to study the purposes and effects of this media construction. They regard their study as a "modest and limited one" (page 91). Therein lies part of its merit. The authors clearly understand what they are establishing and what they cannot establish. And, if they fail to plough any theoretically new ground, they do till some fields needing empirical cultivation.

Their telling is timely in at least three senses. First, cities with three thriving newspapers are not common these days. Contemporary research comparing media institutions tends to emphasize uniformity of coverage. This study permits the authors to evaluate empirically the appropriateness of that emphasis. Secondly, while their study can stand on its own, it's part of a larger project being conducted by the University of Toronto's Centre of Criminology. Thirdly, the study focuses on how media coverage of the "surge" of attacks becomes a mechanism to control women.
The researchers coded the items from the three dailies on three major dimensions. Items were coded as primary or secondary news, with primary news being reports of events. Secondary news supplies answers to questions raised by primary news and includes such things as backgrounders, features, editorials, and letters to the editor. A second dimension was source. They argue that most researchers have failed to track systematically the kinds of sources used by crime reporters. The authors coded five levels of this variable: whether the source of information came from the criminal-justice system; was an individual citizen; an expert or organizational representative; a journalist; or, finally, a participant in an incident.

Their third dimension, locus of problem, is the most intriguing, both theoretically and methodologically. Previous researchers have maintained that one function of news accounts of attacks on women is to remind them of their vulnerability, thereby at best warning women to be cautious, at worst warning them to withdraw from public life. Vounvakis and Ericson created five categories of attribution in news items: the locus of the problem was attributed to the victim, to the offender, to the criminal justice system, to the portrayal of women, or to social pathology.

The authors carefully demonstrate that considerable subjectivity can pollute an empirical coding of attribution of locus of problem. This makes it very odd indeed that "the coding was undertaken by Vounvakis and there were no systematic checks for reliability" (page 25). Obviously that is a glaring error; huge hunks of results and conclusions stand on a foundation of unknown reliability. Consequently, the authors' theorizing, while interesting and informative, should be swallowed with a grain, perhaps grains, of salt.

Nevertheless, they uncover interesting differences in coverage in the three dailies. For instance, both the Star and the Sun gave the thematic agenda considerable more play than did the Globe and Mail. The Globe and Mail ran about two items per week, the other two papers ran about an item every day. Parenthetically, the authors' measure of coverage is always number of items. The length of items is not considered. A short letter to the editor of the Sun counts the same as a lengthy news account in the Globe and Mail. One must wonder if consideration of length would change any conclusion in a substantial way. I suspect not.

The authors speculate that the Globe and Mail published fewer items because its scope is more national than that of the Star or Sun. I question that. The Globe and Mail's Metro section is not published nationally. Perhaps the Globe and Mail was reluctant to cover a "sudden surge" that just wasn't there. There's no way of telling. The content analysis is not supported by observational nor interview data of reporters and editors.
Their analysis of how this kind of media agenda can control women is too sophisticated and important to detail in a short review. Nevertheless, readers will find it interesting and informative. One particular example both intrigues and appalls. On several occasions the Sun juxtaposed a story relating to attacks on women with the "Sunshine Girl." On one occasion the Star reported in detail on the condition of a raped woman in hospital. On the same page paraded four young women in bikinis, contestants in a local beauty contest. Readers objected by writing to the editors. In the Sun's case, objections were invariably undercut by sharp editorial comment. In response to one letter asking the Sun to delete pictures of "Sunshine Girls" because of attacks on women, the Sun followed the letter with the comment: "It's sheer rubbish to connect photos with murders."

Recommend this book to undergraduate and graduate students interested in media analysis. The student will find a concise and useful review of some important theory, an empirical examination of that theory, and some stimulus to further research.