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Book Review: The Media and Political Process

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challenges Habermas's conception of the public sphere, the sort of persuasion defended by the likes of Richard Rorty is championed over rational discussion.

The crucial point is not that McKee is wrong to do this, but that his whole approach appears a little old-fashioned. It oversimplifies both the modernist and postmodernist camps, who have recently embarked on very significant dialogue. Thus, Habermas's own position, as McKee acknowledges, has shifted significantly since he published *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in the early 1960s. But McKee seems uncomfortable with the complexities of the theory of communicative action (for example, misrepresenting the relationship between system and lifeworld as that between public and private), and Habermas's most recent engagements with the problems of multiculturalism, identity politics and the unavoidable substance that the lifeworld gives to the formal structures of public debate, are overlooked. But it is precisely in work like this that Habermas, as a modernist, shows how much he has learnt from his postmodernist opponents (and the debates that he initiated in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*), and that these shifts represent not just a shift of perspective, the result of rhetorical persuasion, but rather a rational reflection on the strength of factual and normative arguments. On the other hand, McKee's presentation of the modernist position fails to engage with the complex cultural analyses that modernists offered, and that postmodernists have inherited, albeit critically. Terms such as 'ideology', 'hegemony', 'false consciousness' are not given the space and consideration necessary to make them any use in defending the modernist corner, and the whole approach of ideology critique, that underpinned Habermas's early work and gave it its force as a criticism of political imbalances, is wholly neglected.

Overall, this is a stimulating book. As perhaps befits a book on the public sphere, it encourages critical dialogue through thought-provoking examples and cases that will open up, especially for anyone new to these debates, an appreciation of the richness of the contemporary public sphere. But the book will also encourage debate through a feeling that certain key issues are, if not overlooked, at least in need of much more thorough examination.

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Eric Louw, *The Media and Political Process*. Los Angeles, London, and New Delhi: Sage, 2005. £19.99. 311 pp.

The Media and Political Process examines the emergence of what the author terms 'media-ized' and 'PR-ized' politics in a number of 'Anglo-liberal' democracies. The central argument of the book is that in a range of Anglo-liberal nation-states, the dominant position and power of elites is maintained, during uncertain and changing times, by an emergent and powerful spin industry. The book, in the face of growing criticisms of the control paradigm (see, for example, McNair, 2003), seeks to demonstrate that such criticisms are misplaced and that elites still exercise definitional power. For the author, spin doctors aid the management of public attitudes in a world of increasing media outlets. These actors have become

adept, in a variety of countries, at manipulating the medium of television, and journalists. Indeed, news professionals 'whether aware of it or not, [are] part of the process of hegemony formation' (p. 116). In turn, the PR machine of 'liberal oligarchies' has 'tamed Western publics', entertaining and distracting them from the realities they face.

Aimed at the student market, the book deals with a wide variety of topics including: spin and party politics; government and PR; the formation of national identity; foreign relations; and the media and terrorism. It contains the usual useful features, such as chapter summaries and key points, and is well laid out.

Critics of the dominant ideology thesis will not find the book's arguments convincing, but it would be wrong to criticize the book on this basis. The criticisms I want to raise relate to *The Media and Political Process* as a textbook. The first is that it is very one-sided for an introductory student text. There may be a debate to be had about the whether textbooks can or indeed should be even-handed, but a book aimed at somebody potentially new to the field surely should cover competing perspectives. Power is a contested topic in media and political studies, and presenting a one-dimensional view of power can only generate a false impression. If anything, students need to be introduced to the differing perspectives in a textbook, and allowed to draw their own conclusions.

For example, one contested area the book overlooks concerns media influence on audiences. The book adopts a rather naive view of audiences as passive. Here is not the place to reprise the arguments surrounding the decoding of political texts, but a student, perhaps coming to the subject of global political communication for the first time, will not be provided with an insight into the variety of views on the impact of the media. For instance, while referenced, the encoding/decoding model receives no prominence, when perhaps it should have played a more central role. An even bigger omission is the fact that there is no chapter on audience reception of media texts. Given the many criticisms of the dominant ideology thesis, I would have thought this would have been essential. Even if the author disagrees with the notion of the active audience, it needs to be tackled head-on and not ignored. In fact, such a reappraisal would have been enlightening.

The second criticism concerns the comparative approach of the book. While the book adopts a multi-country perspective, which is to be welcomed, the significant differences that exist between Anglo-liberal democracies tend to be overlooked. More attention needs to be paid to the differences between Anglo-liberal democracies, for the trends in media-ization and PR-ization are assumed to be universal, with little or no variation in extent. While there is no argument about the rise of PR, its spread and the extent of its use are surely not the same in every country, and there is a danger that such a view leads to crass generalizations. The policy-making practices and the hype that accompanies them will depend on the strategic context in which action takes place; to reduce the development to a pan-national trend simplifies what is a complex interplay between the national and the international.

Third, the author's interpretation of the rise of the democratic state is nothing but controversial. Students reading about the expansion of the franchise might be led to believe that the right to vote was solely the product of the self-interested reforms of 'liberal oligarchs', rather than the product of often bloody struggles. Surely such a view, which is legitimate, needs to be counterbalanced with one that situates the accumulation of such rights as the product of conflict over a period of time.

In sum, the book falls between two stools. It is clearly designed as a student textbook but it does not read as a student text might. In my view, any textbook while putting forward a particular argument needs to tackle the many alternative views that exist, not simply ignore them. A reappraisal of the dominant hegemony thesis in light of technological changes and the 'War on Terror' would be welcome, but this is not it. Those looking for a main political communication text to capture the globalizing face of mediated politics will be disappointed by this offering.

Reference

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Lisa Parks, *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005. £14.95. 256 pp.

Much has been written about globalization and its increasing flows of information. That is why Lisa Parks' *Cultures in Orbit* seems to address a field that has been explored widely and thus offers little room for new and important contributions. However, *Cultures in Orbit* takes an unconventional approach towards the spread of information and offers an interesting and innovative perspective. This is achieved by focusing on satellites. Tracing the uses of modern technology, Parks challenges and refutes the common image of a connected globe. That is, she does not describe increasing dissemination of information around the world, but questions how this dissemination is conducted. In this way, she demonstrates how satellites have created divisions rather than unified the world, and she calls into question our understanding of an ultimately connected globe. Finally, she confronts us with the provocative conclusion that satellites offer a 'gaze from nowhere' (p. 14).

Parks' analysis focuses on power structures. Examining the prime actors involved in the uses of satellites, she dismantles the motives and goals underlying global flows of information. She seeks to show that information obtained through satellites has been 'tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism and male supremacy' and has really led us away from 'everybody and everything' (p. 14). In this way, her book reveals how satellites can spread ostensibly objective insight, which is in fact superficial information 'overshadowed by military strategies, scientific quests, and corporate calculations' (p. 19). For instance, the 'dark areas' and the 'modern and developed nation' (pp. 44–5) presented by *Our World* (the first satellite broadcast with a 'deliberately global reach') and by *Imparja* (a satellite television network owned and run by Aborigines) reveal how broadcasting with an expressed global purpose has created global separations. Moreover, she outlines the use of the Hubble Space Telescope and writes that it has produced knowledge that 'detects Western civilization and scientific progress, only to rewrite the