
A famous quotation that often comes to mind these days is from Hal Holbrook, as Deep Throat, in the film All the President's Men (1976): “Forget the myths the media’s created about the White House. The truth is, these are not very bright guys, and things got out of hand.”

To some great extent, we live in a world of not very bright guys and things that have got out of hand. Much of our media is made up of billowing smoke and flashing mirrors. A growing faction of our leadership is infected with a virulent stupidity so muddy and convoluted that it can be mistaken for subtlety and cunning. And some politics and media have morphed into lowbrow performance art characterized by a posturing, blustering machismo. (Think Boris Johnson, Kevin O’Leary, or Donald Trump.) Being oafish and thuggish makes them dangerous, but taking them seriously can make them deadly. This line of reasoning can be extended to embrace the activities of the news media. Do we interpret, for example, the obsessive news coverage of Donald Trump as propagandistic or parasitical?

If there is one main flaw in the propaganda model of journalism, it is that it fails to take into account that, as in all professions, there are people in the media who are “not very bright guys,” and mediocrity, laziness, and the profit motive have played important roles in debasing the news industry over the years. I write this in the spirit of full disclosure, that I approach a book like Robert E. Gutsche’s Media Control: News as an Institution of Power and Social Control with considerable skepticism, both as a journalist who bridles at the notion that the craft consists of flag-wavers and propagandists, and as a reader who suspects journalism is something less than the high priesthood of truth-seekers and deep-thinkers many practitioners and apologists would have us believe it is.

Gutsche’s argument is that the news business is a partisan, active participant in the structure of political power and social control, news media are, in themselves, power players, and much of the business is strongly allied to forces with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. This is a highly debatable argument with a long history of raising hackles among scholars and journalists, and authors such as Robert McChesney (1999, 2013), Ben Bagdikian (1990, 2004), and Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) have tilled this soil to the point that it has become barren. However, the subject can be rendered fertile again by the examination of such developments as the rise of online alternative news sources and social media, the decline of print and cable circulation, the evaporation of ad revenues, the evolution of native content, and the pressures on journalists also to be marketers and promoters. However, Gutsche, for the most part, argues his case in something of a historical vacuum. By not taking into account the stresses and pressures placed upon journalists by the current economic climate of the industry, and the alternatives presented in the mainstream and evolving news media, he loses an opportunity to update our map of power and control.

Gutsche’s case rests on the examination of selected news stories, mostly from second-tier, provincial U.S. news media. For example, he deconstructs such news stories as the coverage of the protests in Ferguson, Mo., and slanted writing about a black culture festival in south Florida with an eye toward tracking underlying biases and suppositions that mould journalists’ outlooks. This is useful, and somewhat refreshing, in that much journalism commentary focuses on elites and draws conclusions that do not necessarily hold for the work of news media in the “provinces.” Focusing on, say, the New York Times and PBS, or the Toronto Star and CBC, fails to sample news media that likely serve most of the population.

However, at the same time, Gutsche does not offer any examples of, or commentary from, media that may be more resistant to manipulation by power interests, such as The Guardian, Mother Jones, National Public Radio, or the website Truthdig, some of which can be fairly strident in their pursuit of many of the same points made in this book. The relentless focus on negative examples makes it easy for a critic to discount, on the basis of political bias, Gutsche’s arguments. Again, Gutsche tends to give the press too much credit in that he does not allow for stupidity, mediocrity, under-staffing, or acculturation and colonization by business interests. Also, it is odd that a former
Social control is a concept within the disciplines of the social sciences. Sociologists identify two basic forms of social control: informal means of control—internalization of norms and values by a process known as socialization, which is “the process by which an individual, born with behavioral potentialities of enormously wide range, is led to develop actual behavior which is confined to the narrower range of what is acceptable for him by the group standards.” While it’s clear that journalists don’t operate objectively—reporters don’t just cover news, but they make it—Media Control goes a step further by arguing that the cultural institution of news approaches and presents everyday information from particular and dominant cultural positions that benefit the power elite. Media Control helps the reader explicate how the power elite use the press and the veil of the Fourth Estate to further white ideologies and American Imperialism. ...more. Get A Copy. Kindle Store. Amazon.

REFERENCES


Social control is a concept within the disciplines of the social sciences. Sociologists identify two basic forms of social control: informal means of control—internalization of norms and values by a process known as socialization, which is “the process by which an individual, born with behavioral potentialities of enormously wide range, is led to develop actual behavior which is confined to the narrower range of what is acceptable for him by the group standards.” While it’s clear that journalists don’t operate objectively—reporters don’t just cover news, but they make it—Media Control goes a step further by arguing that the cultural institution of news approaches and presents everyday information from particular and dominant cultural positions that benefit the power elite. Media Control helps the reader explicate how the power elite use the press and the veil of the Fourth Estate to further white ideologies and American Imperialism. ...more. Get A Copy. Kindle Store. Amazon.

License URL: [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/)