Media and Power
by James Curran

Reviewed by Srecko Matic

Overview

What kind of influence do the media have on society? What is the role of media in a modern society? Are they agencies of freedom, prosperity and control in social welfare western democracies? Media and Power adresses three key questions about the relationship between media and society. How much power do the media have? Who really controls the media? And what is the relationship between media and power in society? In his book, Curran reviews the different answers which have been given, before advancing original interpretations in a series of ground-breaking essays.

This book treats a wide spectrum of topics within the media in historical, sociological and political context. The author, James Curran – Professor at Goldsmith College, University of London – presents the reader with a guided tour of some major debates in media studies. Some of the specific issues Curran adresses include the role of the media making of modern society, how new media have changed society in the past and what the limitations of the US-based model of communication research are. He offers a solid background of historical knowledge, factual information and common sense logic to back up his claims for media reform. Critical media studies are in the state of ferment. Using different essays the author poses and answers a wealth of important questions about the role of the media. The essays that have been selected for republication all focus on some aspect of media and power. Using different methodologies, traditions and disciplines, they examine three recurring themes: media history, media sociology and media politics. The essays are, for the most part, consistent in what they argue, giving the reader an underlying coherence and consistency in terms of their focus.

The book proceeds as follows

Curran opens with a section about media history consisting of 3 chapters. In the first, he is primarily preoccupied with the central thesis of liberal media history in Great Britain: The process of democratization was enormously strengthened by the development of modern mass media. This thesis is organised around two key arguments. The first of which is that the media have tried to become free of governmental influence. The second thesis of this narrative is that free media have empowered the people. The principal challenge to this interpretation comes from the middle of the 19th century onwards, when the state control system was replaced by a new system based on impersonal economic forces (for eg. rise in publishing costs led to a cumulative transfer of ownership and control of the popular press to capitalist entrepreneurs). These could be neither evaded nor defied.

In the next chapters (Media Sociology) Curran describes the top-sided development of media studies. Using the characteristics of the radical tradition (weakened by self-referential revisionist arguments) he argues that the media are powerful ideological agencies, though not in the form of brainwashing proposed by the members of some philosophic schools. The media can persuade, change and mobilize. The liberal tradition (expanded relatively unchecked by criticism) is the other side of this analyse. Curran reminds the reader of two different, contrasting views of media power. In one, the media dominate the audience, while in the other the relationship is reversed. Both views are problematic. The only truly effective way of isolating media influence is through experimental
methods (which is generally limited to measuring short-term media-influence). How can people influence the media? The author offers a simple receipt: By their allocation of time and money. Market competition leads to market segmentation and specialization as a way of accommodating the demands of different audiences. And the media influences the public not only through campaigning and persuasion but through routine representations of reality. Curran’s opinion is that this “power of definitions” influences public understanding of the world and, indirectly, public attitudes and behaviour.

The subject of the last chapters (Media politics – the globalization and media and democracy) includes a commanding thesis by Elihu Katz (1996) stating that changes in the communications order are weakening the foundations of liberal democracy. For Curran it is fashionable to assume that “a market-based technological transformation of communications is both inevitable and desirable”, p.215). Katz is seeing neo-liberal utopia as a dystopia, but does not dissent from the technological determinism that underlies it. Curran, in this section, presented a British case study that argues that there is nothing inexorable or irreversible about the decline of the public service experiment. The second part of the chapter, a discussion of the media’s democratic role, is intimately bound up with a debate about the media’s organization and regulation. These chapters attempt both to re-evaluate traditional conceptions of the democratic role of the media, and to outline the form which an ideal democratic media system should have. The democratic role of the media (in terms of liberal theory) is the so-called ‘Free Market Watchdog’-principal (to act as a check on the state): “The media should monitor the full range of state activity and fearlessly expose abuses of official authority” (p.217). This perspective has some limits. The set of the following requirements for a democratic media system is complex: “It should empower people by enabling them to explore where their interest lies; it should support sectional group identities and assist the functioning of organizations necessary for the effective representation of group interests; it should also provide a source of protection for weak interests; it should create the conditions for real societal agreement or compromise based on an open discussion of differences” (p.247). Curran concludes that this can be best realized through the establishment a core public service broadcasting system, encircled by private, social market, professional and civic media sectors.

**Conclusion**

This book lends itself to different purposes. It can be read as a textbook offering summaries of academic debates or it can be viewed as a single commentary on media power that looks at media control and influence in the context of wider power relationship in society. Alternatively it can be looked at as one person’s attempt to make sense of the intellectual arguments that are transforming media studies. ‘Media and Power’ provides a critical guide to the debates that are causing researchers to question old models of understanding the media and to seek new ones. In sum, instructors and practitioners can find this in book a rich resource.

**About the Author**

James Curran is Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the author or editor of fourteen books about the media, including ‘Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain’ (with Jean Seaton, 5th edition, 1997) and ‘Mass Media and Society’ (edited with Michael Gurevitch, 3rd edition, 2000).

**Rating**

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**Rating Points: excellent: ++++ poor: +

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