Book Notes

Lars Willnat
George Washington University

Joseph M. Chan and Francis L. F. Lee (eds.), *Media and Politics in Post-handover Hong Kong: An Introduction* **(New York: Routledge, 2007), 120 pp.**

The return of the British territory Hong Kong to China in 1997 initiated a series of remarkable political and social changes that also influenced the mass media in this culturally diverse city of seven million people. What was formerly a thriving and mostly free media system slowly turned into a journalistic tragedy under Chinese rule. Today, as a result of the various direct and indirect pressures by the Chinese government, media practitioners in Hong Kong have learned to practice self-censorship and to avoid sensitive political issues such as Taiwan's independence or criticism of Mainland politicians.

This unique transformation from a free to a controlled media has attracted considerable attention from local and international media scholars, most recently Chan and Lee. These two well-respected communication researchers have collected a series of seven articles that analyze the various political, social, cultural, and economic forces that have influenced the practice of journalism in Hong Kong after 1997.

While the book covers a variety of issues that are seemingly unique to Hong Kong, such as the cultural reorientation of Hong Kong's media toward China or the development of professional norms among Hong Kong's journalists since the handover, Chan and Lee argue that these issues are shared by many other societies. This argument certainly applies to general topics such as the influence of media ownership on ideological shifts in editorial stance, which is covered in a thoughtful article by Anthony Fung, or the impact of media coverage on collective action and public opinion, as described in an interesting chapter by Joseph Chan and Francis Lee. Other topics, however, are more location specific and thus more difficult to appreciate for their contributions to a better understanding of political communication processes outside Hong Kong. Betty Kaman Lee's analysis of the 2003 SARS crisis, for example, focuses specifically on the failure of the former Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa to quickly acknowledge the spreading infections in public and thus limit the death toll of this highly contagious respiratory illness. The potential lessons from this mismanaged crisis might be applicable in other situations, but readers have to extract such conclusions themselves.

What makes this book valuable to anybody interested in the interaction of politics and media is the fact that Hong Kong's small but vibrant mass media indeed face pressures that are quite common around the world—but usually in a much less concentrated form. As a consequence, Hong Kong provides a fascinating test case for how a media system might react to dramatic societal changes that are the result of domestic and international politics. Chan and Lee's book provides an excellent overview of how Hong Kong's media have adapted to these changes with an impressive collection of empirical data that have been gathered during the past decade. As such, it clearly deserves our attention.

John C. Nerone
University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign

Wendy N. Wyatt, *Critical Conversations: A Theory of Press Criticism* **(Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007), 228 pp.**

Wendy Wyatt's *Critical Conversations* offers both a genealogy and a blueprint for press criticism as an institutionalized procedure. Grounding her analysis in the tradition of normative press theory and in Habermasian approaches to the public sphere, Wyatt proposes a system of press criticism that she contends will advance the development of a healthy deliberative democracy. Her argument would be strengthened by a more sustained engagement with existing social movements and emerging spaces of criticism.

Readers will be impressed with the clarity and economy of the language and organization of this book. It is divided into three parts. The first surveys the history of thinking about press criticism. The second constructs a theory of press criticism. The third lays out a proposal for procedures and structures of press criticism. Each section and each chapter is built from the foundation up, with each architectural element clearly labeled and securely inserted.

Wyatt's survey of the history of normative press theory focuses on familiar terrain. The landscape is defined by the debate between Lippmann and Dewey; she sees this continent being mapped most influentially by the authors of *Four Theories of the Press* and the work of James Carey. Specialists will find this survey sound and unsurprising. It convincingly supports the argument that there have long been calls for a more vigorous and regular practice of press criticism. It also evokes a notion of the press as an institution of a deliberative democracy.

The theory presented in section two follows logically. Here, the guiding spirit is Habermas. Wyatt follows him in identifying deliberative or discursive democracy as a kind of middle way between liberal and republican traditions of democratic theory. Discursive democracy grounds legitimacy in the functioning of a healthy public sphere and assigns the media system a responsibility to steward the public sphere. The press or journalism—terms that Wyatt uses interchangeably—must derive its legitimacy, in turn, from its engagement of an active public, normatively projecting a space for criticism.

Part three bravely tackles the practical questions of what the space for criticism should look like. Wyatt lays out a three-level structure: a first level where critics and members of the public interact to formulate criticism, a second level where critics and members of the press interact to transmit criticism, and a third level where members of the press deliberate to respond to criticism. Such an apparatus of criticism should envelop each news organization ideally. This structure will produce criticism in five domains—content, philosophy, structure, power, and the relationship between the press and democracy.

The domains of criticism include an acknowledgment of the realities of the media system, but Wyatt does not propose structural change. Partly, this comes from commitment to discursive democracy: What she outlines is in effect a metadiscourse of criticism—the ground rules and institutions of it—and not outcomes or substance. But it also conveys a disagreement with the sort of structural criticism best represented by Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, which, although itself an influential exemplar of press criticism, does not make a space for the effectivity of press criticism, because it does not expect journalists to be able to overcome the limitations of media structures. For press critics who believe that structural change is the first priority, this work will disappoint. It will also disappoint those who fault Habermas for a lack of concern with social realities such as gender and race.

It disappoints me for failing to engage with existing social movements for change in the media system. Wyatt cites Howard Kurtz, Ken Auletta, Norman Solomon, and a few others but concludes that "beyond these relatively few instances, little regular criticism appears, and none is modeled on the discursive procedure so important to the work at hand" (p. 166). She remarks, "Although the very essence of a democratic society is communication, the press—a seemingly democratic institution—is in conversation with no one" (p. 190). A cursory browsing of the content of cable television and the Internet undermines these claims. In historical terms, this is a golden age of press criticism, both vernacular and professional. What this flowering means in terms of the very valid concerns over deliberative democracy that Wyatt raises is worth pondering, and her book is a valuable gateway to that conversation.

Geneva Overholser
University of Southern California

Jeffrey Scheuer, *The Big Picture: Why Democracies Need Journalistic Excellence* **(New York: Routledge, 2007), 216 pp.**

There is no shortage of writing about the many changes so quickly reshaping the media world today. The particular contribution of this intriguing book is its focus on the vital underlying question, Why should we (and, in particular, why should the public) care? Scheuer's powerful answer is that a democracy can be only as good as its journalism.

The Big Picture covers a lot of imposing ground in eight tight chapters, from the nature of democracy and its interplay with journalism to the relationship between journalism and education. Given the sweep and abstractness of the topics (what is journalistic excellence?), it is perhaps unsurprising—but still slightly annoying—that the book tends toward repetitive assertions: Scheuer cannot, it seems, state often enough that journalistic excellence is essential to democracy.

Still the virtues greatly outweigh the shortcomings in this compelling examination of the essential intertwining of journalism and democracy. Scheuer notes, for example, that, while journalism is vital, "nothing in the U.S. Constitution guarantees that there be news, let alone high-quality news." He speaks of the relationship between capitalism and journalism. ("Real news, almost by definition, cannot be intended purely for profit.") And he lists the biases (toward upscale consumers, toward novelty and shock) into which journalism is cast where the commercial model is the dominant method of supplying news.

Settling on "three graces of journalism"—truth, context, and independence—Scheuer is particularly helpful in looking at how citizens might better assess the journalism around them and in focusing on the importance of media criticism. Much shaped by the Hutchins Commission, *The Big Picture* includes useful reminders of some of the more important recommendations of that body. The admonishments to the press to "assume the responsibility of financing new, experimental activities in the field" and to "engage in vigorous mutual criticism" are reminders of how apropos that report remains.

Scheuer's thought-provoking but incomplete look at journalism education comes across as a kind of afterthought, narrower and thinner than his other chapters. He is much more forceful and concrete on what should be jettisoned—essentially all skills training, not to mention undergraduate journalism education generally—than he is on what should replace it, a rare departure from his predilection for constructive recommendations. Still, there are useful

points, such as his call for journalism schools "to be independent centers of criticism and debate about journalistic issues and society."

Unsurprisingly, the book's closing look at the future feels a bit overtaken by the pace of digital-media developments and of the economic collapse in traditional media. Yet there are important and hopeful suggestions on how to encourage noncommercial media, from tax write-offs for nonprofit journalism to a call for "imaginative use of private wealth." In a time dominated by a discussion about what has gone wrong and what is emerging, this effective focus on why it all matters is invigorating.

––––––––––––––––

Cory L. Armstrong
University of Florida

Paula Poindexter, Sharon Meraz, and Amy Schmitz Weiss, editors, *Women, Men, and News: Divided and Disconnected in the News Media Landscape* **(New York: Routledge, 2007), 368 pp.**

One might conclude from the title of this book that it focuses mainly on gender disparity in the consumption and presentation of news content. While that certainly is a prominent theme, the book is much more comprehensive in its scope, covering issues including race, technology, readership, portrayals, and consumption.

In fact, its comprehensiveness may be both a blessing and a curse, as some chapters put women less in the forefront than others within the confines of the large amount of research and ideas presented. The 368-page book is an edited volume, but eleven of the eighteen chapters are penned—at least in part—by one of the three editors.

The first section of the book was written entirely by Poindexter—a professor at the University of Texas–Austin. It is a well-researched synthesis of past and current literature, tackling the issue of gender from news production and consumption perspectives. She provides a wealth of information related to how women are portrayed in news content, why they often ignore the news, and the role of gender socialization in contributing to this disparity.

The second section focuses particularly on women in newsrooms and in news content. This section is a compilation and summary of past research in these areas and aptly contextualizes the gender disparity—a lack of female managers, sources, and the continuation of a masculine culture within news production. In many ways, this section, while informative, might be better placed as an introduction to the book, instead of an isolated section in the middle.

Another section includes three chapters on online news and activities, although a chapter on social networking and instant messaging is contained elsewhere in the book. While this section was insightful, given the pervasiveness of online and interactive news, I clamored for more gendered-related research of this evolving medium.

And finally, the last section (roughly two hundred pages) offers perspectives from other scholars in the field of gender, race, and news production. Each offers great insights into feminist theory, gender relations, and the intersections of race and culture within news. It is this section of the book that most significantly contributes to the existing knowledge base of feminist-related research on media.

Perhaps most intriguing were the three chapters on the gender divide in international news content, where contributors were asked to profile the status of journalism within individual countries. For example, a newspaper or magazine in Nigeria costs about 4 percent of the average

Nigerian's monthly income (p. 200). Interestingly, the fact that 40 percent of Al-Jazeera's staff is female, including eight of eighteen anchors (p. 198), may signal that some women's issues are being discussed in global media.

While the book could be used in an upper-level undergraduate conceptual news production course, it would be most appropriate for a graduate-level reading seminar focusing on either general issues in news content or race/gender and media. Certainly the scads of useful information contained within it will enlighten the many students who will undoubtedly read it.

Eva Campos Domínguez
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Víctor Sampedro Blanco, ed. *Medios y elecciones 2004. La campaña electoral y las "otras campañas"* **(Madrid: Centro de Estudios Ramón Areces, 2008), 278 pp.**

Víctor Sampedro Blanco, Oscar García Luengo, Ricardo Vizcaíno Pérez, and Manuel Trenzado Romero, eds. *Televisión y Urnas 2004. Políticos, periodistas y publicitarios* **(Madrid: Centro de Estudios Ramón Areces, 2008), 158 pp.**

In terms of political communication, the March 2004 General Elections were the most interesting elections to have been held in Spain since the restoration of democracy because of the entirely new relationship to information that arose between the political parties, the media, and the voters.

The Conservative Party, the "Partido Popular" (PP), had been in government since 1996, with a hung parliament for their first term (until 2000), but an absolute majority in the second four years. Opinion polls held prior to the 2004 elections predicted another victory for the PP, although with the loss of their absolute majority. Throughout the run-up to the electoral campaign, and during the electoral campaign itself, the Conservatives dominated media coverage with two important issues: Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA) terrorism, and unity of the Spanish State, accusing the Social Democratic Party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), of favoring policies that would lead to a strengthening of the terrorist group, and of supporting separatist movements within Spain. Three days before the General Elections, the 11-M terrorist attacks occurred, the political parties suspended their electoral campaigns, and the debate began on who was responsible for the attacks. The question was whether the responsibility lay with ETA—coinciding with one of the central pillars of the PP's electoral campaign—or with Al Qaeda—endorsing the PSOE's argument against government support for the Iraq war. The official line, which attributed responsibility to ETA, collided in the media with other interpretations put forward by the general population and the opposition.

The political analyst Víctor Sampedro Blanco, lecturer at the Rey Juan Carlos University in Madrid, is among those who have carried out the closest and most in-depth studies of the cross-exchange of information between the media, politicians, and the public during recent election campaigns in Spain. Taking the 2004 General Elections as a point of reference, he has coordinated the work carried out by a group of researchers hailing from different Spanish universities, aimed at clarifying media reporting before and after the 11-M terrorist attacks. The main results of this collective effort have been published in *Medios y elecciones 2004* (*The Media and the Elections, 2004*), coordinated by Sampedro Blanco, and *Televisión y Urnas 2004* (*Television and the Ballot Box, 2004*), coordinated by Sampedro Blanco, García Luengo, Vizcaíno Pérez, and Trenzado Romero.

The first book is divided into seven chapters: The first three analyze to what extent, and how, the political parties dictated the media's agenda during the run-up to the electoral campaign, and during the campaign itself, taking January 11, 2004, as the starting point. The next two chapters focus on the communications scenario that arose between the time of the terrorist attacks and the elections on March 14. The sixth chapter is a study of collective public action media visibility, while the last chapter deals with some of the key issues in relation to public participation in the political debate through political party Web sites.

Sampedro Blanco and Sánchez Duarte wrote the first of the above-mentioned chapters. Focusing on media agenda building, they look at the extent to which political leaders managed to control, redefine, or block the dominant campaign agenda in the written press. To this end, they analyzed the discourse of 779 news items published in Madrid's and Barcelona's leading newspapers, showing how the then government—the conservative PP—managed to dominate the media's agenda during the election run-up and the first week of the electoral campaign, forcing the opposition to respond to their initiatives and attacks.

While the first chapter focuses on an analysis of the written press, the second chapter looks at the dominant agenda transmitted by national television, including the state-owned TVE station, and the private Telecinco, Antena 3, and Canal Plus stations. Again focusing on media agenda building, the authors of the second chapter (Sampedro Blanco, G. Luengo, and Jerez) based their research on the hypothesis that the agenda that political parties try to communicate to journalists is based on problems, linked to discursive frameworks, which justify their policies. From an analysis of 280 news items taken from prime-time news broadcasts and late-night news programs, the researchers concluded that the political party in power also dominated the agenda on television, in an attempt to discourage the Social Democrat vote.

Chapter 3 looks at negativity and confrontation in television coverage. The author, Óscar G. Luengo, takes the theory of framing, and of media politics, as a point of reference in an attempt to uncover the extent to which political information during the 2004 election was constructed with a greater or lesser bias toward negativity parameters. The author analyzed the content of news items broadcast by TVE, Telecinco, Antena 3, and Canal Plus and added a brief comparison with the written press, looking at the three leading national newspapers, *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*.

Political strategies, media agenda building, and public opinion surrounding 11-M are the focus of chapter 4, written by Casero Ripollés. Following his analysis, the author concludes that political and media actors unfolded strategies that were destined to exercise control over the political market, which at that point was submerged in chaos following the traumatic aftermath of the terrorist attack. In the initial stages of the crisis, television reporting reflected the government's stance, thus reinforcing its electoral aspirations.

The fifth chapter, concentrating entirely on the time between the attack and the general election, develops an interesting analysis. Taking Noelle-Neumann's *The Spiral of Silence* (1984) and Kuran's *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (1995) as starting points, Durán Muñoz shows how the theories are complementary in an explanation of the development of events and the final results of the elections (with a victory for the PSOE, albeit not with an absolute majority). In the course of his research, Durán Muñoz analyzed the political discourse relating to responsibility for the 11-M attacks in news items broadcast by six nationwide and regional television stations, and in newspaper reports printed in the national newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*, and in the Catalonian newspaper *La Vanguardia*. The author concludes that although the government initially dominated the discourse for electoral purposes, a new discourse arose propounded by a significant sector of the general population, which broke through the *preference falsification* maintained by the political parties, exposing the official lie initially imposed.

Chapter 6 presents research on media visibility of collective public action during the electoral period. The research, carried out by Sampedro Blanco, Carriço Reis, and Reis, is based on an analysis of the quantitative and discursive content of news and opinion reporting published in *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC* between March 1 and 21, in an attempt to establish the visibility of social action as against more institutionalized agents. Results of the research lead the authors to conclude that political figures were given greater preeminence than societal activity in the media analyzed, and that public demonstrations were shown in an electoral framework, as being the result of political party strategies.

The final chapter of the first book analyzes virtuality and propaganda, censorship, and disinformation in political party Web sites. The authors (Sampedro Blanco, Tucho, and Vizcaíno-Laorga) carried out research based on an experiment, whereby messages were sent to the only discussion forum set up in the virtual headquarters of the political parties, and also via electronic mail to the political parties. The authors sent electronic messages to e-mail addresses to elicit a personalized response (this process was called "deliberation") and to discussion forums to detect censorship (this was called "control"). This procedure revealed how little encouragement there is for interaction between the general public and their political representatives via this means, in detriment to the importance the image of Internet still has for politicians.

Televisión y Urnas 2004 (*Television and the Ballot Box, 2004),* the second book coordinated by Sampedro Blanco in collaboration with García Luengo, Vizcaíno Pérez, and Trenzado Romero, is an educational text, the structure and content of which recall two of his previous works: *Televisión y Urnas 2000. Políticos, periodistas y publicitarios* (*Television and the Ballot Box, 2000. Politicians, Journalists and Advertising Agencies*) and *13-M: Multitudes on line* (*13-M: Online Crowds*). In this case, *Televisión y Urnas 2004* also represents a commitment to education, attempting to involve the reader in an analysis of the facts. The book is organized into six chapters and includes two DVDs (with subtitles in English and French), the first containing original material from the 2004 electoral campaign, and the second outlining the proposal for analysis put forward by the authors.

The chapters in this book are structured along the same lines: an introductory and contextual framework, questions to address in an analysis of the material on the first DVD, and a proposal for analysis in the second DVD. The study is based on television, and the time framework comprises the run-up to the electoral campaign to the 11-M terrorist attacks. The content complements that of the first book, *Medios y elecciones 2004*, insofar as it reinforces some of the issues dealt with in the latter through the use of audiovisual materials, and invites fresh reflection and new lines of investigation. Thus, *Medios y Urnas 2004* is a companion volume to *Medios y elecciones 2004*, enabling a more in-depth study of the issues through the presentation of original material and giving additional documentary value to the research.

In short, both books provide excellent examples of the two issues that have marked Spanish politics: on the one hand, an accentuated polarization of the system, as represented by the PP and the PSOE, and on the other hand, the strong control exercised by these political forces—especially in the case of whichever party is in power—over the media, in what Hallin and Mancini (2004) defined as "polarised pluralism."

Medios y elecciones 2004 presents an enriching analysis of how Spanish political agents control the agenda of the traditional media during the run-up to an electoral campaign and during the campaign itself, but how in the exceptional case of 11-M, the general public—previously immersed in the lethargy provoked by a campaign characterized by power relationships between political parties and the media—became actively involved in the political arena, seeking their own communication resources. The new information and communication technologies constituted a key tool for action, enabling the citizens to gain access to media free of Spanish political control (such as the international media) and to organize collective action

(using text messages, for example). It should also not be forgotten that once collective action was initiated, some of the traditional media, such as the radio, helped to spread the message.

The 11-M attacks ruptured the hegemony of prevailing news reporting through the active involvement of citizens in the electoral campaign (demonstrations, protests, and demands for information). The significance of the analyses provided by both books suggests the need for complementing this information with more research into the role that radio and the Internet played for those members of the general public who questioned the predominant political and media discourse and that gave rise to an absolutely new form of political activism in Spain.

References

Hallin, D., and P. Mancini. 2004. *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kuran, T. 1995. *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Noelle-Neumann, E. 1984. *The Spiral of Silence: Our Social Skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.