

U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960: A Guidebook for What Is to Come? By Nancy E. Bernhard. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 245 pp. ISBN 0521594154.

Nancy E. Bernhard's *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* arose from graduate research begun by the author in 1987. Finally published in 1999, the work takes its place alongside other titles in the Cambridge Studies in the History of Mass Communication series, such as Gregory Black's *Hollywood Censored* and Michael Sproule's *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion*. Ironically (or predictably, according to your level of political cynicism), though the works in the series deal almost exclusively with the American mass-media context, they are published out of the United Kingdom.

This text takes a scholarly approach to a particular historical period and is directed squarely at challenging elements of American self-understanding related to the dominant consumer/capitalist or military/industrial culture. The author, who is now the associate editor of a public-policy journal, makes her affiliation with the academic left evident from the start by crediting the inspiration of the work to conversations with Edward S. Herman and by thanking Bob McChesney, among others, in her acknowledgments (p. xvii).

In her introduction, Bernhard begins by declaring her intent to "explode" two assumptions about the Cold War era she believes most Americans hold: that the U.S. government allowed a "free marketplace of ideas" and that the commercial nature of the mass media ensured that there was always a balanced debate of competing ideologies (p. 7). In order to question the historical accuracy of these assumptions, this study intends to follow the creation of meaning according to the model of "cultural hegemony" with a focus on the role of institutions (p. 10). Hence, the key players in this history are the U.S. government and the media corporations whose close co-operation produces the cultural climate of the time. Ultimately, Bernhard intends to prove that the political economy of the mass media necessitated an agreeable relationship with the government and that, together, both institutions created a climate wherein objectivity was equated directly with anti-communism.

From her perspective on the margin, Bernhard is sensitive to issues of credibility, noting that "Assertions about the misuse of corporate power are often dismissed as irrational conspiracy theories" (p. 178). Perhaps to expressly avoid dismissals of this kind, Bernhard's arguments are extremely well researched. The citations of direct sources in the text are supplemented by 20 pages of detailed notes at the end of the book. The impressive bibliography includes more than 100 titles on media history, history of propaganda, and communications theory. The author also makes use of government publications and records, including the collected papers of many of the key players of the era, as well as oral histories and films located in federal libraries.

Overall, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda* is clear and concise, making it accessible to a wide range of audiences. The large number of quotations, citations, and listings of names and titles, however, makes the reading of it somewhat tedious. The arguments themselves are always supported or framed by fact, and the style of exposition and density of research are consistent throughout the book. Unfortunately, the narrative, separated as it is into institutions and historic episodes, compromises the coherence of the main arguments somewhat. The jumping back and forth between eras is also slightly disorienting. The recurring themes, such as corporate motivations of self-preservation or the government's attempts to regulate the commercial broadcasting sector, which unify all of the historical data, may have served as better headings and made the argument clearer overall.

Considering Bernhard's great efforts to convince the reader that government and business were complicit in fabricating information during the Cold War, one has to wonder for whom this point is being made. Hysteria, overzealousness, and repression are commonly

associated with this era in the popular consciousness, and few would be surprised to hear that the leading powers of the day were involved in manipulating facts to maintain the status quo. Certain angles are left unexplored by Bernhard's text, and these missing perspectives may have made the study even more interesting and relevant to a modern audience.

The "institutional approach" that directs the study certainly sheds light on how big decisions were made by the elites of government and media corporations, but it fails to address the role played by the general population and popular culture in the Cold War. We are expected to agree that the media "sold" Cold War consensus to the people, but no time is given to public reaction or public dissent, which, though small, must certainly have been present. By sticking exclusively to the institutional perspective, the text recalls the one-sided dissemination or "hypodermic needle" theories of communication that were typical of the era.

Another aspect of the historical narrative that lacks clarity is the nature of the motivations which led corporations to co-operate so eagerly in the spreading of propaganda. Early in the work, the partnership between government and business seems to be based on the belief that consumer capitalism is good for both the country and the company (p. 10). However, when the discussion turns to the television networks, the evidence presented seems to represent the same media corporations as driven by self-interest rather than patriotism or ideology. The shift from ideologically motivated co-operation during the Second World War to profit motivation in the postwar period is unconvincing. The internal ideology of the media corporations, though harder to examine, bears further examination. Bernhard, however, aimed to prove only that the corporations' dependence on government shaped their message, rather than to show to what extent they desired to propagate beliefs themselves.

Of all the points Bernhard makes, the fact that the interdependence between government and large media corporations destroys objectivity in "the marketplace of ideas" is the most compelling and of greatest relevance to the contemporary setting. In a climate of fear and renewed militarization, can we expect dynamics similar to those present during the Cold War more than 50 years ago to be at play? Certainly, media corporations have converged and increased their power dramatically over the past few decades, and their relationship to government may have changed from one of dependency, as Bernhard depicts in her model, to one of power rivalling that of the state. Nonetheless, as a study that provides understanding of present circumstances and insights into future developments, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* is well worth reading. One can only hope it will inspire further historical studies of other cultures that have been faced with a scripted consensus, thereby shedding more light on the ambiguous nature of truth in crisis situations.

References

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Tom Liacas
Concordia University