



Media Control: News as an Institution of Power and Social Control. By Robert E. Gutsche Jr. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 383 pp. ISBN: 9781628922967.

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 bristles 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 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, understaffing, or acculturation and colonization by business interests. Also, it is odd that a former journalist would not allow his subjects to address the issues and concerns raised by their work. A series of interviews with some of the journalists responsible for the work cited would have expanded the horizons of the book considerably. This would have given serious, thoughtful journalists the opportunity to offer constructive criticism, and for bad and inept ones to hang themselves with their tongues.

Finally, this would be a much more effective and readable work if it were written in a consistent style, and had been properly copy-edited. Some sentences and paragraphs are so convoluted and/or ungrammatical as to be nearly impenetrable. For example: "But to argue as journalists and scholars interested in normative and social scientific explanations of the news often do that I as the reporter and my editors did not operate with knowledge of how to craft news as a consumer product by using stories of shootings, poor grammar and police information would be misleading" (p. 12). There are far too many passages like this that collapse in on themselves and force the reader to spend time decoding them. Also, the misspellings, grammatical mistakes, and recurring subject-verb disagreements ("baulks" for "balks," "university's" for "universities," "riled" for "roiled") are infuriating and distracting, and undermine the credibility of the writing. This could be a by-product of the author's tendency to vacillate between a lucid, narrative style and the kind of vague academic jargon that pretends to ideas so complex that they defy expression in plain English, when it is the complexity of plain English that is confounding the expression of the idea.

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