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Book Notes

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Book Notes

Frank R. Baumgartner, Suzanna L. De Boef, and Amber
E. Boydstun, *The Decline of the Death Penalty and the
Discovery of Innocence* (New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2008), 292 pp.

Few issues evoke as much debate and involve as much complexity as the death
penalty. The issue pits basic values against one another—such as just punishment
and the sanctity of life—and touches on all parts of our political system including
the public, the media, interest groups, elected bodies, and the judicial system. How
all these pieces come together to determine the ebbs and flows of death penalty policy
is the topic of Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun's book, *The Decline of the
Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence*. The book offers important insights
into the death penalty issue itself with many of its findings having clear implications
for understanding public policy (e.g., why the application of the death penalty has
shifted). But for the scholarly community, the book offers even more. It amounts to
a stunning example of how to seamlessly study the relationships among public
opinion, media, and policy. It is a book that all social scientists would benefit from
reading—indeed, it is social science at its best.

The book begins with an extensive historical background of the death penalty in
the United States. A major turning point occurred in the mid-1990s when a conflu-
ence of forces brought the application of the death penalty into question. This
included the use of DNA evidence, innocence projects, changes in homicide rates,
and rising consciousness about the role of race in sentencing. These, as well as other
factors, became manifest in media coverage, which in turn shaped public opinion
and ultimately public policy.

The authors trace this process using thoughtful and rigorous methods. Of partic-
ular note is their methodology for analyzing how the media portray or frame the
death penalty over time. Specifically, the authors employ an evolutionary factor
analysis that enables them to isolate specific arguments and frames that dominate
debate at a particular time. By content analyzing *New York Times* coverage from
1960 through 2005, they are able to identify the major frames that dominated death
penalty debate. These include frames such as "an eye for an eye," "constitutional-
ity"—sometimes pro-death penalty and sometimes anti—and "humanizing the
defendant." Since 1992, the prevailing frame has been the "innocence" frame, which
is a frame that brings the penalty into question because of the possibility of the
defendant being innocent. In a major theoretical contribution, the authors detail the
factors the made this the key frame. They identify three crucial features including
salience (frequency of appearance), persistence (length of time that the frame
appeared), and resonance. Resonance refers to the number of arguments (or clusters)
contained within the frame. The innocence frame included the most arguments,

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including those related to fairness, constitutionality, class, race, evidence, and so on. As a result, the innocence frame resonated with the most people, and consequentially was able to overtake the "morality" and "constitutionality" frames that had previously prevailed. Identifying what makes a frame strong is a major contribution, as scholars have long struggled with this issue.

The authors then explore how media coverage dominated by the innocence frame shaped public opinion, showing that along with levels of homicides, media coverage played a substantial role in leading to increased opposition to the death penalty. And these effects are not fleeting. Finally, the authors link the pieces together by exploring the impact of various factors on public policy (e.g., the number of death sentences in a given year). Their results show that media coverage is the driving force behind policy changes, with homicide rates and public opinion having smaller impacts. They speculate about some of the key forces behind changes in media coverage, including the aforementioned DNA testing, homicide rates, innocence projects, and so on. Notably, they also point out that corporations or elite actors, who often disproportionately determine policy, were not behind the shift. Delving further into the connections between these variables and media coverage as well as uncovering exactly why media coverage played such a powerful role would be fascinating topics for a next project (for the authors or others). I imagine that this book will stimulate such research, and even more broadly, influence the way that scholars study the media, public opinion, and policy for years to come.

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Zhao, Yuezhi. 2008. *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.

The "peaceful rise" or, as the Chinese communist leadership now calls it, the "peaceful development" of China has spawned a great deal of interest around the world, indicated by the number of academic books and articles published on the subject recently. However, with few notable exceptions, many of these broadly fall into two camps: uncritical accounts of the waking Asian giant, mostly emanating from Chinese scholars, and studies, largely produced in the West, that focus on the undemocratic nature of the one-party state, its human rights violations, and media control.

The book under review, written by a distinguished Chinese scholar based in the West, breaks new ground in that it skillfully charts the terrain of China's communication landscape, deploying a framework that is at once historically informed, politically engaged, and intellectually sophisticated. In this richly detailed book, based on empirical and institutional research, including interviews with media professionals, policy makers, and consumers, Yuezhi Zhao paints a complex picture of the

transformation affecting the world's most populated country and one which is perceived, accurately, as an emerging superpower.

The book situates the Chinese communication system, in her own words, "in the evolving state-society nexus in post-1989 China" and analyzes "the dynamics of communication, the formation of class and other forms of power relations, and social contestation during a period of deepening market reforms" (p. 5). Zhao, Canada Research Chair in the Political Economy of Global Communication, provides a rigorous analysis of the transformation in the Chinese communication system, examining its historical trajectory and economic, social, and cultural underpinnings as well as how it has developed strategies to globalize and, at the same time, resist transnational media conglomerates.

The book is divided into six well-thought-through chapters covering core dimensions of the transformation of Chinese communication landscape, including the party–state's regulatory regime, the commercialization of communication industries, the global integration of Chinese communication and cultural industries, the political and social mobilization through new media, and intellectual and social challenges to excessive neoliberalism.

A worthy follow-up to Zhao's 1998 study on the Chinese press, this volume broadens the terms of its analysis from the traditional news media to the rapidly growing entertainment and information sector and the increasingly significant role that the Internet is playing in social and political communication among millions of Chinese (by 2008, China had acquired the distinction of being home to the largest number of Internet users in the world as well as having the biggest population of bloggers on the planet).

One key strength of the book is that it not only maps these developments from the perspectives of the elites but also takes on board what the author refers to as "China's subaltern classes," at the receiving end of excessive marketization. At a time when the corporate media—both in China and globally—tends to valorize the Chinese model of double-digit economic growth, Zhao's sobering study shows through excellent case studies the tensions and contradictions of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." This version of "market socialism"—David Harvey's term "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" is perhaps more appropriate—has an ugly side too, as Zhao points out; in 2005 alone, 87,000 cases of what the Chinese authorities refer to as "mass incidents"—riots and uprisings among the poor and the dispossessed—took place within the country.

Intellectually, Zhao's work firmly belongs to the critical communication studies, and this outstanding book enriches that well-established tradition. It is an indispensable source for anyone interested in China in general and Chinese media and communication in particular.

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Tanni Haas, *The Pursuit of Public Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 208 pp.

Although Tanni Haas's scholarship focuses on public journalism, his new book serves as a useful reminder of how much the citizen media/"we" media/participatory journalism movement owes public journalism conceptually. It also demonstrates how, in many ways, this citizen media movement has failed to engage many of the democratic principles public journalism seeks to advance and demonstrates how public journalism itself has failed to reach its potential in advancing public deliberation. Haas writes, for example, that "news organizations are doing more to facilitate interaction between their newsroom staff and audiences than to facilitate interaction among citizens themselves and between citizens and government officials" (p. 137).

As traditional journalism is being radically transformed, we hear a lot about moving from the one-to-many model to the many-to-many model and often hear the catch phrase "journalism as conversation." Reading Haas develop his "A Public Philosophy for Public Journalism" will force anyone bantering about those phrases to start asking not only What do they mean in a general sense? but How might journalism as a conversation manifest itself—with whom, why, and for what end?

For Haas, journalists—and now, by extension, anyone who wants to foster public deliberation on the Internet—must first decide who should be involved in the conversation. Depending on the problem at hand, necessary participants might be any combination of citizens, experts, and government officials, and solutions might lie at the regional, national, or international level. But it is a matter of public interest for journalism to help get the participant mix right. Quoting directly from Jeremy Iggers's *Good News, Bad News,* Haas writes that "to encourage the public to participate in public discussion in a context where there is little prospect that the conversation will have an impact runs the risk of deepening public cynicism and disaffection" (p. 43).

For Haas, public journalists too often strive for public deliberation with the aim of consensus, which for him is problematic. With social inequalities so entrenched, "a shared, overarching vision of the common good" (p. 37) may gloss over the concerns of those already disadvantaged. Indeed, Haas believes, "a sense of solidarity is more likely to emerge from mutual respect—which acknowledges difference—than from an abstract pursuit of commonality" (p. 38).

However, the bigger question is, Who, in this time of declining news media resources, will take on the public deliberation mantle? Haas looks to the blogosphere and citizen initiatives as possibilities, but writes, "While it is certainly possible that citizens themselves could accomplish such goals, there is evidence that this does not happen in practice" (p. 160).

In fewer than two hundred pages, Haas covers the history of public journalism, its strengths and weaknesses, its spread internationally, and its relationship to the citizen media movement and the blogosphere. However, his central message is that

"news organizations should help ensure that the concerns of the most marginalized social groups are articulated and heard to the same extent as those of dominant social groups" (p. 160).

He will make traditional journalists—and not so traditional ones like me—quake, when he argues "journalists should actively endorse those politicians, candidates for office, and special interest groups whose agendas would best serve the overarching goal of reducing social inequality" (p. 46). Nonetheless, whether you agree with him or not, he builds his argument so well that anyone interested in public deliberation would do well to consider Haas's insights or run the risk of making public discourse more harmful than helpful.

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Iggers, Jeremy. 1999. *Good News, Bad News.* Boulder, CO: Westview.

David D. Perlmutter, *Blogwars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 272 pp.

David Perlmutter's *Blogwars* maps the phenomenon of political blogging in the United States, exploring the relationship between blogging and American social and political institutions and grounding blogging in a historical context, both ancient and recent. In this accessible, insightful text, the author argues that political blogs are here to stay. They play a variety of increasingly integral roles in the nation's political and media systems, even if they are not quite the revolutionary force many blogging advocates claim.

The author discusses historical antecedents of blogging, but he asserts that blogging is something new after all. The interactivity and associative linking inherent in blogging are keys to its appeal and effectiveness. The author has been a blogger himself, and his compelling personal accounts help demonstrate the importance of these unique aspects of the blogging form. These accounts also reveal the fevered rush of blog publishing and the sting that comes from fierce, sometimes irrational, criticism.

The author recognizes the importance of both agency and social structure in blogging, noting the in-group/out-group psychology of blogging communities and the balkanization of the blogging field. Ultimately, the author argues, bridge-building among blogging communities is possible, and rigorous public discussion can result. However, the mechanics of this process are not analyzed in depth. In places throughout the book, such claims could use more evidence and explanation.

The book's discussion of the form of blogging hints at another source of cohesiveness: that a shared understanding of the logic and grammar of blogging supports

interaction among these diverse groups. The author suggests the intriguing notion that those who can "fit" the blogging form can join in the discussion. The impact of the media logic of blogging is worth further examination.

Relatively scant attention is paid to issues of power and social control—for example, the consequences of bloggers' dependency on resources. According to the author, blogging may be professionalizing, but several anecdotes in the book suggest possible movement toward a clientelist model in which bloggers post in return for patron-like support. This depiction raises important questions that the book does not examine thoroughly. For example, to what degree may bloggers be receding from public space, or abandoning the pursuit of professional autonomy, in order to work toward privately supported purposes? To the extent that this is the case, why, and to what effect?

Much of the book's account of blogging's brief history and the discussion of bloggers' demographics will be familiar to those who have studied this media form, but they should effectively orient those new to the field. In contrast, the author's detailed insights into the latent functions of blogging are something new, and they suggest interesting directions for research.

Ultimately, the author makes a nuanced, well-contextualized, and accessible argument that political blogging represents neither the death knell of traditional news media nor of traditional political organization. Bloggers are finding, and making, their place within the larger system, and in the process, blogging is both changing the system and being changed by it.

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Jairo Lugo-Ocando (ed.), *The Media in Latin America* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2008), 296 pp.
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Latin American countries, with their diverse histories and cultures, do not tidily fit a concise description. Some, like Nicaragua, are desperately poor. Others, like Chile, are doing relatively well economically. Citizens of some countries love baseball; others don't even understand the sport. The variations extend to the media systems. Cubans, for example, struggle under an authoritarian/communist system. Other Latin American nations have more open press systems, but journalists still face challenges ranging from death threats to subtle forms of censorship. So any attempt to come up with a grand scheme that neatly defines the region and its media would be futile. Recognizing this, editor Lugo-Ocando allows chapter authors to focus on the particularities of each of the twelve studied countries. Aside from providing basics about media history and structure, the authors loosely examine the

media's role as a mechanism of control—how the powerful political and economic elites use the media to serve their needs and maintain dominance. The Latin American media, according to Lugo-Ocando, have "become an increasingly sophisticated mechanism of control, one that is less politicized and more oriented towards satisfying market needs within the ideological framework of liberal democracies in the region" (p. 2).

The authors, most of whom have lived and worked in their respective countries, stress the elements most important to each country. For example, the chapter on Nicaragua discusses the impact of poverty, the chapter on Argentina stresses the impact of the 2001 economic crisis, the chapter on Venezuela discusses the conditions that led to the tension between the media and President Hugo Chávez, and the chapter on Peru stresses the role the media can play in promoting both development and democracy. While that leeway strengthens the essays, it also makes for certain inconsistencies—some chapters are loaded with statistics on circulation and audience, some provide extensive histories of the countries' media, some apply theory like agenda-setting or cultivation. A few more guidelines for authors and some stronger central themes would have helped. Perhaps one theme might have been the role of digital media, a topic discussed for only a few of the countries. The impact of media concentration or the turn to sensationalism likewise could have been more consistently and aggressively pursued across all the countries.

This book is a good starting point for basic knowledge about the media for particular countries. For example, the chapters on Mexico, Argentina, and Chile, among others, provide great detail on ownership patterns in print and broadcast media and the potential concerns regarding media ties to political and economic elites. But not every chapter provides that. For example, the Brazil chapter deals almost exclusively with broadcasting and regulation. The final chapter, which addresses regional integration through the case of TeleSur, a multination project led by Venezuela to provide an alternative broadcasting voice, seems a better fit for a book about international news networks. Also, many countries, like Ecuador, Uruguay, Guatemala, Panama, Dominican Republic, and Honduras, are not covered in the book, although the editor acknowledges time and space considerations and leaves open the possibility for an expanded work in the future.

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