

## **Peter J. Anderson and Geoff Ward (eds) (2007) The Future of Journalism in the Advanced Democracies.**

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According to Anderson, the threat to the quality of journalism in advanced democracies is a 'silent problem of alarming proportions' (p.273). This begs the question: how did he reach such a conclusion, which echoes the same fears expressed by academics, editors and reporters regarding the 'killing' of journalism by technological developments and the forces of capitalism?

Anderson and Ward edited this book of sixteen chapters, the primary focus of which was to demonstrate how simultaneous economic and technological developments are challenging journalism in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States. They termed this phenomenon the 'ec-tech squeeze' (p.52). In the first four chapters, Anderson, Ward and Weymouth analysed the performance and placement of 'hard news' in various media outlets. Their conceptualisation of 'hard news' was a normative rather than stylistic one, for they defined 'hard news' and political journalism as ways to 'inform and encourage reflection, debate and action on political, social and economic issues' (p.8). They argued that the quality and performance of 'hard news' had a direct impact on the 'fair and effective' operation of democracy (p.19); thus good journalism should facilitate 'informed judgement' and mobilise citizens to participate in democratic debate. The 'hard news' thesis was underpinned by Anderson, Ward and Anthony's allegiance to the Anglo-Saxon 'objective' media model, albeit one in which the notion of a 'free market of ideas' should be challenged. They critiqued the equivalence often drawn between the 'free market' and the 'free press' and called instead for greater state regulation over the media in order to counter the increasingly concentrated corporate ownership and commodification of news.

The book, which was international in its scope, pursued three core questions (pp.6-7) in an attempt to maintain coherence. These questions were:

- 1) To what extent is traditional 'hard news' losing ground to 'soft news' across the media of the advanced world and what can be done to reverse this trend if this is a serious problem?
- 2) To what extent is the range and depth of coverage of news issues within the advanced democracies adequate for the purpose of ensuring that electorates are adequately informed about the world around them?
- 3) To what extent is it possible to access balance presentation of the news within the various advanced democracies?

While international comparison is a central feature of this book, it is important to note the strong British orientation of the material it contained; six chapters focused on the British media, while only five considered other countries. Despite this imbalance, the book presents a detailed study of the British media landscape with three fields analysed in detail: newspapers (national, regional and local), radio and television. It was alleged that, in all three media sectors, there was an increasing amount of entertainment within the news and a corresponding fall in 'hard news' output. Explanation put forward to explain this 'softening' included reductions in the numbers of readers/listeners/viewers; a decrease in advertising revenues, changes brought about by the Internet and concentrated ownership in the hands of a few players.

Despite such insights regarding the British media, there were two major problems with the book which hindered its comparative scope. The first was the difficulty of comparing the material contained in the more academic chapters with that included in the more journalism-oriented chapters. The Yada chapter (p.175), for example, on Japanese journalism, which included extensive figures and quotes, attended to the cultural, economic and technological context of the media in this, the most powerful Asian country. However, Yada failed to explore how these interacted and impacted upon journalism. By contrast, the Mancini chapter (p.229) effectively related the economic and political context in Italy (for example readership levels, the impact of television, the political alignment of the media, etc.) with the behaviour of journalists and the media as a whole. One of the key features of Italian journalism, Mancini argued, is 'political parallelism', whereby the media market effectively shaped the political system.

The second problem of the book was the failure of some chapters to adequately account for the impact of structural factors, such as the economy, political context, technological development, etc., on the production and content of 'hard news'. The general absence of content analysis meant that it was difficult to answer the first question posed by the book: 'to what extent is traditional hard news losing ground to soft news across the media'. In chapter 14, Mancini failed to show how 'political parallelism' in Italy influenced the construction of 'hard news' and the surge of 'soft news'. In the chapter on Germany, Hickethier (p.191) attended to historical patterns of media concentration, the fragmentation of the public, the ethic codes for journalists and their working conditions, but neglected to evaluate the impact of these on journalistic behaviour. Likewise, in the chapter on Japan, Yada points to the trend towards 'trivialization' but failed to explain how this was transforming the content of newspapers, radio and television.

Despite such problems, the book inspires new ways of thinking about the impact of economics, politics and technological change on the construction of news. Furthermore, the journalism-orientated chapters provide the raw materials for further empirical research. The most important contribution made by the book, however, is the commitment of the editors to rediscover the political role and value of journalism. Terms such as 'political commitment' and 'state intervention' have, historically, been avoided within the liberal-pluralist tradition of 'journalistic

objectivity'. This may change given the global economic crisis brought on by neo-liberalism. Anderson, for example, a defender of balanced, impartial and objective journalism, insisted that governments had an obligation to defend the production of 'hard news' in order to preserve democracy. In practical terms, Anderson suggested that, to guarantee the survival of 'hard news' in the media, governments should create a "high powered institute ... funded jointly by governments and industry to conduct in-depth investigations" (p.272). In conclusion, this group of writers argued that the state should have a greater role in rescuing journalism in the advanced democracies; in short, if it's time to rethink the role of the state in the global economy, then it's time to reshape the role of the state in journalism.

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