

## Book review

Journalism

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Richard M Perloff

*The dynamics of news: Journalism in the 21st-century media milieu*

New York and London, Oxen: Routledge, 2020. 328 pp. ISBN 9780815377894

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First things first: Richard Perloff contacted me to discuss some of his book, *The Dynamics of News*, as he was putting the final touches together. I found the project intriguing and was flattered to be consulted by someone I had read extensively during my doctoral studies at Iowa. Even with that conversation, I have promised to deliver a critical review. But, to be honest, that wasn't all that hard to do. What's to be appreciated most in Perloff's book is his willingness and ability to explain the process of newswork as not just a sociological one, but an ideological one.

Perloff complicates the now-seemingly-age-old model of news and hierarchies of influence in our field – where we get the idea of individual, routines of work, organisational, institutional and larger social influences on news – by paying homage to the ideological. The seminal and most-adopted forms of these hierarchies, informed by the work of Pam Shoemaker, Stephen Reese, and others, tend to apply sociological, rather than ideological and cultural, approaches to our understanding of what shapes newswork and its products. With a nice nod to Gramsci, Marx, Herman and Chomsky, and Thompson, Reese and Shoemaker (2016) still note that 'ideology explains how the social system hangs together as the media project ideas and meaning in the service of power' (p. 404). Yet, a continued focus on being sociological, and not taking hegemony into even greater account beyond a perspective of critical political economy, Shoemaker and Reese and others who cite and apply their work often fail to see the importance of the approaches of cultural studies that Perloff adopts throughout his book. This is, of course, because Reese and Shoemaker approach journalism from a sociological perspective and because of continued rifts in epistemological strategy in the field.

In *The Dynamics of News*, Perloff doesn't argue for ideology to merely be represented as a set of beliefs that inform news practices and that may align with or diverge from audiences and other stakeholders that hold society together. Instead, he approaches ideology in discussions of journalism as that which informs a system of power (and some, like myself, might add of control) and that is connected with ideas of news authority as a form of hegemony. In other words, Perloff doesn't release journalists – and institutions – from responsibility for their racist coverage, their nationalistic stance, and their

capitalistic sense simply because of a social structure of influences. Of hegemony, Perloff writes, the concept ‘stipulates that news is a systematic handmaiden of the status quo, propping up the forces-that-be in subtle, not always coercive, ways’ (p. 280). It is the intertwining of social and culture, ideological, and normative influences and acts of news that makes journalism seem less coercive than it really is, which Perloff (perhaps inadvertently) reveals.

For instance, Perloff’s clear alignment of journalism with military and government sources (a sociological relationship) reveals its ideological alignment between the social systems and institutions of news and government that, on the surface, show journalists as watchdogs that is also a force for pushing dominant agendas and hegemonic explanations of social conditions. When looking at US news coverage of ‘foreign affairs’, for instance, Perloff writes that journalists can show the inequalities of war and the dangers it brings, but also promotes nationalistic and celebratory coverage of military might, with newscasts calling for US victory through ‘favourable, chest-pounding, status quo-affirming news. . .’ (p. 280). It is this tension of normative, sociological, and cultural interpretations – the practices, institutional connections and ideological explanations that shape news – that Perloff’s writing addresses, ultimately arguing that ‘society needs news, an institution that is indispensable for democracy’ but that it is ‘fraught and imperfect’ (p. ix). Perhaps to news scholars such debate is not new. Yet, for those learning about the complexities of journalism, notions of nation, and language or power, these discussions throughout Perloff’s book on how news is shaped by indoctrination that is known and unknown to journalists who ultimately propagate explanations of power structures can, to turn a bad phrase, blow their mind.

It is Perloff’s balance of approaches to journalism studies that makes his book useful to the student and as a reminder to the scholar. His raw acknowledgements of race and gender influences in the events that become news and the creation of news itself – including gendered and white newsrooms that at this point in time seems to be nothing less than intentional by the powers-that-be – best present interpretations that truly uncover the workings of ‘meaning in the service of power’ (Thompson, 1990: 23).

To be clear, Perloff does not recommend revamping the sociological model and its focus on institutional pressures that informs much of our work in recent decades, and increasingly so with massive development in technology, economies, social politics and globalisation. Yet, *The Dynamics of News* tugs at the tensions of social and cultural practices within popular culture, entertainment, global hegemony, and individual and collective identity in ways that encourage us to complicate how we talk about the construction of news. And certainly, Perloff reminds us of the unfriendly systems of power in which US journalism is situated that could be expanded upon from cultural perspectives in the field and does so to inform and engage readers with the potential for change that comes with the such realisations.

## References

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- Thompson JB (1990) *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*. Cambridge: Polity Press.