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These two books, the first scientific, meticulous, and nuanced, the second rich in documentation and fueled by passion and outrage, distinctively respond to two of the central challenges of studying and researching political communication: the causes and the consequences of the media's contents. Focusing specifically on the undertaking and conduct by the United States of foreign conflicts, the books seek to capture and describe the media's coverage and explain what produces it. They then trace the depictions' effects, in particular on public opinion and its support or not for the president and his administration's policies and direction of the conflicts. They add a normative thrust, discussing the implications of their findings, though not what should explicitly be done about them.

In this review, I discuss and juxtapose the following subjects from each book: research methods, media coverage, and explanations for and effects of the coverage. I identify the similarities and differences in the books' findings and arguments. First, though, a complaint: Perhaps because portions have been previously published or presented, both books are rife with repetition and excessive details. They should have been subjected to far more extensive editing.

Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling systematically test a host of hypotheses and corollaries derived from their “strategic-bias” theory of elite press–public interaction. Their methods include media exposure experiments, analysis of national survey data of news preferences, content analysis of Internet news sources, and content analysis of the television networks’ evening news coverage of evaluations by members of Congress of the president and his administration on Sunday morning interview shows. They focus particularly on the US war against Iraq.

Anthony DiMaggio details media coverage of the Iraq war, US escalation in Afghanistan, and Iran's alleged nuclear weapons development, as well as cases of genocide and government repression. He cites and quotes from numerous news stories, commentary from editorials, op-ed pieces, and opinion columns in the US media, notably the New York Times, and Washington Post. He compares this material to coverage in the foreign (United Kingdom and Muslim) press and magazines. His content analysis is extensive, although his procedures are not always clearly explained.

Both books take off from, and take issue with, the “Opinion Indexing hypothesis.” This is the view, common among scholars of political communication, that most of the time media coverage of the US administration's decisions to go to war and its conduct of wars (and many other, especially foreign, policies) is indexed to and faithfully reproduces the rhetoric of elites.

Baum and Groeling acknowledge that journalists utilize authoritative sources. However, they identify different types of elite rhetoric: cross-party attacks, intraparty praise, cross-party praise, and intraparty attacks. They argue that news stories, rather than truly representing elite rhetoric, overrepresent criticism of the president, particularly from his own party, and to a lesser extent, coverage of support of the president by members of the opposition party.

In addition to authoritative sources, Baum and Groeling identify three other elements to explain the contents of news stories. These professional incentives of newsworthiness employed by journalists are novelty, conflict, and balance. The result is that “partisanship and negativity dominate war coverage” (p. 179).

DiMaggio, too, recognizes that journalists index elite rhetoric to report and comment on US foreign conflicts. But he subjects the indexing approach and its proponents to withering criticism (and scorn) by applying the “propaganda model” developed by Edward S. Herman and
Noam Chomsky (*Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, 2002). He contends that in disseminating the official view, journalists defer to official misinformation and are “little more than lapdogs of the state” (p. 19). Even when the mainstream media eventually opposed the Iraq war, it was on procedural, not substantive, grounds: for the war’s cost and overextension of the US military, but not for “illegally invading a sovereign nation, for maintaining a material interest in Iraqi oil, or for responsibility in the deaths of more than one million Iraqis since 2003” (p. 13).

Moreover, the media ignored criticism by progressives of US policy as aggressive, illegal, terrorist, or imperial. Debate in wealthy countries allied to the United States was similarly constrained, except in the press of the United Kingdom. It was the media in poorer, less developed countries that challenged US foreign policy. DiMaggio provides several reasons for the limited coverage (and noncoverage) in the US media. One is that journalists agree with US foreign policy goals. They omit the antiwar perspective because they have “contempt for progressive views” (p. 130). Another reason for the domination of indexed coverage is the socialization and indoctrination of journalists imposed particularly by journalism schools that demand objective journalism: Objectivity “requires that journalists defer to official sources, no matter how ill-founded their claims” (p. 118). Career incentives and advancement also matter: The rare journalists whose stories violate the spectrum of elite views are punished.

People can ignore, embrace, accept, resist, reject, or oppose media contents. So both books address the second question: What, if any, are the effects on public opinion of the media’s coverage of US wars?

According to Baum and Groeling, public opinion tracks media contents. People’s support for a policy depends on the elite rhetoric to which they are exposed by the press, more precisely, on the credibility of the messages, of the sources, and of the context in which they are delivered. These are determined by journalists’ decisions about which speakers and messages to cover and by the elite debaters appearing in the media. People’s reactions also depend on their partisan affiliation.

Because the media’s representation of elite rhetoric is inaccurate, as Baum and Groeling document, people are prone to reach inaccurate conclusions. However, reality and changes in events can catch up and surpass the news media’s framing of elite rhetoric. President George W. Bush and his administration strongly influenced media coverage at the outset of the Iraq war, but this influence receded over time.

For DiMaggio, the media restrict public debate to the spectrum of agreement and disagreement expressed by political elites, and they omit critical points of view. Audiences may be content with this limited news and not know what they are missing. For example, the author refers to the tremendous power of political leaders and journalists to mold public hostility toward Iran’s government.

Yet DiMaggio finds that the American public reacts to changes in information related to military conflicts. Based on his data, he concludes “that the effects of media and government propaganda are potentially powerful in the short term but limited over longer periods of time” (p. 255). As conditions in Iraq worsened during the course of US involvement, opposition to President Bush’s Iraq policies and support for troop reduction and withdrawal increased.

So the books concur that the media eventually reported facts and events, such as Iraqi violence and American casualties, which mobilized public opposition to the war. But DiMaggio’s explanation for such coverage—that the journalists probably did so “because they feared they would lose credibility if they refused” (p. 228)—is unlikely to be shared by Baum and Groeling.

Both books are also optimistic about people’s ability to find the truth. Baum and Groeling write that “sooner or later, it would seem the public can discern the true merits of a conflict to at least some degree, regardless of elite efforts to spin events to their own partisan advantage” (pp. 221–2). DiMaggio concludes that the American public does not passively accept the dogmas proclaimed by officials and repeated by journalists. Rather, “Americans are often successful in creating their own narratives that present not only pragmatic challenges to US policy but substantive ones as well” (p. 288). The reasons for the authors’ optimism are not always convincing.

Most people still rely on television networks for their news. Increasingly, though, they can go to cable news channels and the Internet, including the blogosphere, for partisan news and opinions that agree with, and thus reinforce, their ideological preferences.

Baum and Groeling extend their analysis to these new media. Partisan outlets enable elites to manipulate public opinion, especially among their fellow partisans. They attract like-minded audiences (such as Daily Kos for Democrats and liberals and Fox News for Republicans and conservatives). This selective exposure has its effects. Viewers who rely on Fox News, with its support for President Bush and the war against Iraq, were most likely to believe that the war was going well.

Partisan media produce polarization. In a partisan and polarized media and public opinion, Baum and Groeling see a threat to the bipartisan foreign policy consensus that has relied on the traditional news media. Mass media perceived as relatively nonpartisan, and thus credible, allowed presidents to promote their foreign policies effectively. But when media are perceived as partisan and thus less credible, and people rely more on news consistent with their own partisan preferences, presidents will find the American public, except for their partisans, less willing than in the past to rally behind them. Bipartisan support will be harder to come by. It will be more difficult for the president to pursue the strategic interests of the country or to advance a coherent foreign policy. Leaders will find it daunting to achieve policy consensus.
DiMaggio would dispute the extent and importance of the partisan divide. He points out, for example, that neither the mainstream media nor cable news (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC) “seriously challenged the notion that Iran is building towards nuclear weapons” (p. 250). US journalists, no matter how partisan, are limited to and by the ideologically narrow American view. They ignore or dismiss the opinions of the people in the foreign countries America is engaged with (Iraq and Afghanistan) and world opinion generally. DiMaggio is far less concerned about presidential leadership than are Baum and Groeling. His concern is that the US media’s coverage of the country’s wars is harmful to American democracy.