

Brian Trench

Review

The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman

Reviewed by
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One reason stands out above all others for studying the media: what the media does presumably exerts important effects. That presumption underlies most informal commentary and much formal analysis. Yet one weakness stands out above all others: little published analysis offers any solid proof of the strength or nature of the media's influence and effects. The reasons for this may lie more in the limits of what is capable of being known than in lack of scholarly effort. There simply are no reliable ways of establishing specific effects of media messages on perceptions, attitudes or behavior.

There are few plausible analyses of how a series of media events, or the output of particular media organizations, generated particular responses in media audiences. To show conformity between media representations and public perceptions poses an interesting question, not an answer. This paradox of "presumed but unknown" media effects lurks at the heart of mass communication and journalism studies. The ease with which so many scholars use a concept such as "agenda-setting" with its premise of media as cause and public attitudes and/or policy as effect, is evidence of a highly inadequate degree of self-awareness. That daunting paradox also hampers this academic study of relationships between media performance, public opinion and political strategies in the United States during the 2000 presidential election, and its aftermath.

The title rings boldly: *The Press Effect*. But it is not at all clear who is telling the "stories that shape the political world," or where they come from. In a critique of the media's glib penchant for psychological profiling of major personalities, the authors *briefly survey* techniques of media effects research, emphasizing their limitations. They discuss the "likelihood" that one story version was "more effective" *in influencing the public* than another, offering evidence from public opinion surveys. But what they are describing is better

viewed as correlations, mediated in both directions through politicians, press and public, rather than as direct causal effects. Yet Jamieson and Waldman do try to develop a more nuanced approach. Combining critiques of media content with analysis of politicians' parties' rhetorical strategies, and opinion and survey data, they build a compelling and disturbing picture of media bias and of failure to tell the full story. They refer to honorable exceptions and acknowledge that parts of their critiques are derived from observation of other professionals whose commitment to truth is, in their view, admirable. But the dominant effect of their study is to raise deep concern about the state of health of American journalism.

Their key concept is "framing," which seeks to establish what aspects of particular stories are given greatest weight in their telling in the media. Looking at print and broadcast media on a range of topics over 2000-01, the authors demonstrate how story frames espoused by particular parties were taken up in the media, and how the preferred frames left significant or more appropriate aspects of those stories marginalized. Media coverage of the 2000 presidential election campaign is said to have adopted the frame of Gore-as-liar and Bush-as-stupid. In part, this is attributed to the way the contending parties, applying negative campaigning tactics, sought to frame the opposing candidate. In part, it is attributed to the media's need for personality profiling. In describing in this way how the media treated recent political episodes, Jamieson and Waldman are being neither exceptional or exceptionable. They do, however, acutely highlight how linguistic choices (e.g., in TV news anchors' phrasing of questions) displayed the operationalization of particular frames. And they venture into unusual places to do so: for example, a content analysis of jokes on late-night shows, and a close analysis of the phrasing of questions on Sunday current affairs programs for evidence of dominant perceptions among media professionals.

The authors venture into more daring territory when they mention the alternative available frames that they say the media largely ignored, and deserved at least equal attention. But they rarely explain how these alternative frames might be made "available." As an "old European" reading media accounts of the Florida recount, I was lost in undervotes and overvotes, chads and dimples, various categories of absentee ballots, and butterfly ballots. I wondered why there were apparently no accounts in mainstream media that characterized the punch-card ballot as bizarre, the conflicts of interest affecting leading arbiters of the process as scandalous, the state counts and Electoral College system as archaic, and the low turnout of voters across the

United States as seriously undermining the legitimacy of the election result. Are these the frames of a Martian, or European, or were they not also “available?” Did they not also merit inclusion in the range of possible frames? I was *also* surprised to find the authors’ analyses completely contained within the Republican versus Democrat difference.

There is a pervasive tone of complaint about media performance. Invariably, what was “seldom done” represents the authors’ preferred option. The authors pose rhetorical questions as to why the media did not tell that story or highlight that point. They refer to the dulling of the *press’s* fact-finding instincts, to the press uncritically embracing “government-blessed versions of fact.” Occasionally, the authors do acknowledge that elements of the press corrected mistakes, or returned to investigate disputed events, such as the Florida presidential election recount. Despite their judgment that the public is “well served in the longer term” by the press, the tone of this analysis puts the authors clearly in the “glass is half-empty” school. The *press’s* principal failure, *as they see it*, is *in* allowing itself be diverted from seeking facts. “The dramatic narrative can drive out relevant facts,” they state. Indeed, it can, but it is likewise true that dramatic narrative allows relevant facts to become accessible to the public.

The authors believe that “we rely on journalists to tell us, above all, what is true and what is not.” *So, they say*, when the TV networks called the result early in Bush’s favor, “the viewing public accepted these descriptions as facts.” Every successful “deception or persistent public misconception can be understood in part as a failure on the part of the press in its role as custodian of fact.” The necessary qualification—a big one—is the “in part” phrase, but they move on as if the qualification was minor. The authors seem to believe that pristine pure facts are readily available. One of their key cases concerns an argument during the 2000 presidential election over plans for Social Security. Jamieson and Waldman observe, justifiably, that the press emphasizes political strategy over policy—the how and why, rather than the what and who. But they are on dicier ground when they insist that the responsibility of the press was to determine whose claims were correct. Policies, and any judgements on them, are matters of interpretation rather than statements of fact. The authors are surely right to say that journalists have an important role in helping the public make sense of policy choices, but that may as often involve judgements on motivation as arbitrations on fact.

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Telling stories is a large part of how we interact and how we make sense of things. It is important to look at the specific role of the press and to measure its performance against stated standards. It is a different thing to argue that the press is the strongest link in the story-generating chain or to argue that it is deviating from its primary responsibility *in telling stories* or to argue that it accommodates too comfortably to the politically dominant story-frames. Jamieson and Waldman are ambitious and brave in seeking to argue all of these propositions, and more. They offer much valuable evidence that others will want to pore over too. But, on balance, their case is unproven.

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