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Joseph N. Cappella, Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. viii + 325 pp. $38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-509064-2; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509063-5.

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Media and the Roots of Political Cynicism

The media have become in the last twenty or so years subject to a battery of criticisms that they offer less and less political news and instead pander to base interest in entertainment and health and beauty issues; that they reduce complex issues to dichotomous contests between the forces of darkness versus the forces of light; that they flit from issue to issue, attending to one item only until another comes along, incapable of extending "news time" to real "political time"[1]; that North American, especially American, media, are increasingly parochial, uninterested in international events and issues; that, as private profit-making enterprises, they pander to the consumption economy which gives them life.[2]

One of the more subtle criticisms is that the media are at least partly responsible for the ill-repute in which politicians and the political process are held. Public cynicism, according to this charge, can be attributed not merely to what the media are saying about politics, politicians, and the issues of the day, but to how they are saying it. All sorts of people have an interest in making this charge. Defenders of the current President of the United States, for example, are wont to explain the media's preoccupation with Monica Lewinsky and the White House sex scandal in terms of their insularity and a pathological need to move a story along with new, more sensational angles and evidence, whatever their merits.[3]

Much criticism of the media is impressionistic and polemical. It easily descends into scapegoating, and accordingly can be as easily dismissed. But do the polemics have any foundation? Do the media purvey cynicism, or do they merely communicate "what is out there"? Can empirical evidence be mustered to settle the matter? This is the task to which Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson address themselves in *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good.* While much of the book is a fairly technical presentation of statistical evidence drawn from controlled experiments, they make their project a matter for concern to any political observer. At bottom, they challenge the reader to reflect on some big questions: What is politics? How can we understand the activity of politics? With what other human activities can it best be compared? And with what other activities would a comparison yield deleterious consequences for political life?

News coverage, like all communication, operates in metaphors, and the metaphors commonly deployed to communicate political events and issues are those of sports and war. We routinely speak of elections as "horse races," candidates "coming from behind," races "going down to the wire." Party politics is described as a "team sport." Politicians get "outflanked," elections are "pitched battles," political enemies "sling the mud." So common are these metaphors that their significance escapes us. Their significance does not escape Cappella and Jamieson; how the news is structured or framed–how a metaphor is deployed to organize and make intelligible otherwise inchoate political information–is central to their purpose.

For the authors, sports and war metaphors, ubiquitous as they are, do not exhaust the possibilities. Political events, as any reader of Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics* remembers, can also be framed as a debate among proponents of divergent positions. Here the debaters are not so much competitors or enemies as members of a community holding some things in common and others not. To apply another metaphor, a dinnertime conversation among members of a family could fairly be described as a debate among diverse members of a community. Is it at all accurate or illuminating to describe that conversation as a military campaign or a sudden death playoff?

The discussion of issues is a way to frame news, and this frame, argue Cappella and Jamieson, is more congenial to the democratic concepts of common good and responsible, informed citizenship. The media have a choice, they claim, and they choose the wrong ways to present

news to the public. After all, what is important is not merely what is said. It is also crucial to understand how what is said is said. This is what framing of news stories is all about. Of interest to the authors and anyone concerned about the political power of the media is how framing affects our views of politics.

This critique is commonly made, but again, the difference with this book is that the authors attempt an empirical verification of an otherwise well-worn polemic. Here is the theoretical background. In their cognitive-narrative approach to human understanding, the authors claim that human knowledge is based on the ordering of information into understandable networks of nodes. Stories provide such "associative networks"; they are the structures on which hang the details of news. Stories make information intelligible. They impose order on chaos.

Framing political news in terms of sports and war orders news in a particular way. The authors call this kind of framing "strategic framing." In sports and war, actors set for themselves a clear, widely known goal: to win. Their efforts are directed to this singular end. Observers are invited to draw obvious conclusions about the motivations of the actors. Everything, to the observer, is done by the actor for the purpose of achieving the ultimate goal. And the actors are duly praised for such strategic thinking. We admire the Olympic swimmer who for years, with gold medal in mind, spends hours daily in the water perfecting his or her stroke.

But when the strategic frame is applied to political events, observers are led to conclude that the politicians are single-mindedly bent on winning, whether winning means winning an election or winning a vote in the legislature. Everything they say and do is considered instrumental to this final purpose. Observers are led to conclude that the motivation of the politician is essentially one-dimensional and selfish. Even when they tell the truth, politicians are thought to be subordinating it to the ulterior end of victory. Citizens then become cynical about politicians and the process allowing them to act one-dimensionally. This is because, Cappella and Jamieson argue, people are cognitive misers: people make judgements about people and issues as they absorb information. When a news frame is presented to them in future, not only do they recall specific facts triggered by the content of the story; they also recall the judgements they made when they engaged the frame earlier on.

So Cappella and Jamieson argue that the strategic news frame stimulates and embeds in the political consciousness of news consumers a particular view of the world, resulting in a world where political leaders are driven wholly by the strategic imperative, the will to win. And while this makes perfect sense in sports, it produces a cynicism in the democratic polity damaging to its long-term health. The strategic frame occludes other ways of seeing politics. The media, long thought the properly skeptical watchdogs keeping politicians honest, have instead stepped from skepticism into a corrosive, debilitating cynicism concerned only with the finding of fault, the impugning of motives, and the trashing of solutions.

The authors conducted controlled experiments using two news events. The first was a classic "horse race" political story, the Philadelphia mayoral election of 1991. The second was a complex public policy debate, the Clinton health care reform initiative of 1993-1994. News stories were crafted to reflect two types of news frames, the strategic frame already discussed and the "issues" frame which presents political events not as a contest among combatants but as a debate among divergent perspectives on what best serves the public good. They expected subjects exposed to strategic coverage to understand politics in strategic terms, and to be more cynical in consequence. Those exposed to issue-based coverage would possess a healthier, more sophisticated understanding of politics and political issues. Since the results of different types of news consumption were compared to control groups, differences in reported attitudes could be attributed to the independent variables–that is, the news frames.

Their conclusions can be summarized briefly:

A) Framing produces a significant recall effect. After they are exposed to a particular type of frame, respondents later recall information consistent with that frame.

B) Strategic framing increases respondent cynicism. Consumers of the mayoralty race coverage reported significant cynicism about politicians and their motivation.

C) The evidence is not so clear for issue frames. Indeed, issue coverage of the health care reform debate also tended to produce higher cynicism. The authors did not expect this result and attempt to explain it by noting that when issue coverage is roundly negative such that coverage "undermines all available solutions" (p. 161) even issue frames can induce cynicism. Thus "conflict-oriented" issue framing produces the same effects as strategic framing. Their content analysis of the health care coverage indicates that media treatment of this issue was even more negative than the 1992 Presidential election campaign. The data do not wholly support this explanation, but the authors are satisfied that the theory and the data

are highly suggestive.

D) Regarding the demographics of cynicism, cynicism does not vary by respondent's ideological disposition. Nor are the cynics more likely to read strategic coverage. Cynics believe that the media impose strategic frames on political news. Political cynicism also spills over into media cynicism. Cynicism is highest among avid consumers of political news. Respondents considered "uninterpreted" media coverage–that is, coverage coming into the living room over the heads of the journalist-commentator–to be most positive.

>From all this Cappella and Jamieson find general support for their theory. The findings point to an unsettling set of spirals. This first is that the media and politicians both carry on a cynical discourse because each thinks it is required by the other. Politicians do not get coverage unless they are negative and cynical. Reporters are cynical because this is the picture they are presented with and it happens to be a very simple way to pitch a story. The second is that public cynicism accordingly increases. The third spiral is that reporters think the public wants and will reward cynical, negative coverage (pp. 237-38). Media perceive that news consumers want a horse race, not political substance.

Is there hope? The authors take some solace in favourable respondent attitudes formed after they viewed an NBC special program called "To Your Health," which was based on a news frame different from the strategic and issues frames. This program followed the "narrative news frame" and had the following features: "absence of technical discussion of health reform plans; real people with stories about their own health care concerns; interaction among experts, leaders, and ordinary citizens; little political posturing or pandering by the leaders and experts; little innuendo from reporters about the real, hidden motives of the involved parties; the search for an acknowledgment of common ground when it existed; [and] civility by all parties" (p. 234). The program was popular, informative, serious, and engaging, and it avoided the cynical, psychologizing spin of so much other programming.

This is an engaging, provocative read, even for those not enamoured of significance levels and t-tests. The book gives an imprimatur to common sense understandings of media effects. Yet this serves as a criticism: the book is far more interesting as an exercise in political theory than as a quantitative verification of widely held suspicions. I was left thinking more about different conceptions of politics and how the media seem bent on conveying only certain conceptions. Unfortunately, this is a matter on which the authors only touch in their book.

I also wonder if the authors' surprising finding–that the issues coverage of the health care debate, like the strategic coverage of the mayoralty race, induced cynicism–calls into question a major premise of the book. The authors engage those who believe that the media are incapable of being anything other than a shallow, callous, and ultimately destructive player in democratic politics. Cappella and Jamieson suggest that there are alternatives to strategic framing and that these can contribute to a civil, constructive politics. Yet if both issue-based and strategic framing can induce cynicism, we seem left with the conclusion that the media induce cynicism unless the coverage is light, peppy, agreeable, and tame. If this is so, then the media do seem incapable of communicating political information to a democratic populace.

Nonetheless, *Spiral of Cynicism* deserves a place in the literature on recent republican political theory. The authors appeal to a discourse of the common good, to the civility of debate among members of a community. They attempt to demonstrate how a departure from such a discourse can be destructive. And they suggest ways the media can contribute to republican conceptions of democratic citizenship. One cannot fail to notice the Arendtian themes in the book. The authors seek a redefinition of politics away from sport and war–and the attendant fixation on the motivations of political actors these metaphors provoke–and toward debate, reason, and discourse on the common good.

Finally, Cappella and Jamieson contest an older, still venerated notion that the achievement of democratic polities in the twentieth century has been to domesticate, defang, and in some ways "depoliticize" politics. Democratic stability, in this view, is achieved by transforming politics into bloodless sport.[4] No such luck, say the authors. Civic disengagement will exact its price. Politics is politics, not sport. To think otherwise is to imperil democracy's prospects.

Notes:

[1]. Thomas E. Patterson, "Time and News: The Media's limitations as an Instrument of Democracy," *International Political Science Review* (1998) 19, 55-67.

[2]. For a current catalogue of the polemics against the media, see Serge Halami, "Myopic and Cheapskate Journalism," *La Monde Diplomatique* (November, 1998), 14-15. Writes Halami: "We have seen a continuous process of redefining what news is, directing it towards what entertains and what is profitable."

[3]. Joan Didion, "Clinton Agonistes" *New York Review of Books* (October 22, 1998), 16-23.

[4]. "That politics has relatively little importance for citizens is an important part of the mechanism by which the set of consistent political orientations keeps political elites in check, without checking them so tightly as to make them ineffective." Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965), 348.

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