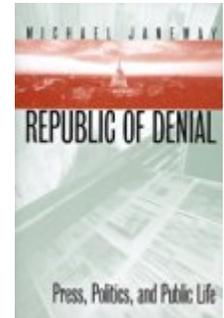


Michael Janeway. *Republic of Denial: Press, Politics and Public Life.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. 177 pp. \$22.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-08123-7.



Reviewed by Philip Seib

Published on H-Pol (January, 2000)

With eloquence and passion, Michael Janeway presents a grim picture of American public life. Although his readers may be tempted to say, "Aw, c^Òmon, things aren^Òt really that bad," Janeway makes his case effectively enough to give pause to even the most committed optimist. His focus is on political institutions and the news media, particularly how the decline of the former has been inadequately covered by the latter. This is not an esoteric issue. A democracy needs alertness and responsiveness on the parts of government and press, and if either or both fail to provide that, alarms should be sounded.

Janeway^Òs appraisal of the current state of affairs is crisply critical. He has good credentials for making his judgments. Now a professor at Columbia University^Òs Graduate School of Journalism, he was editor of *The Boston Globe*, executive editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, and dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. He also spent time in government service.

"The most significant story of our time," (p. 6) says Janeway, has been missed by journalists because their own profession has become so entan-

gled in business concerns that it has failed to perform its responsibilities to the public. The story that should be covered, Janeway says, "is the saga of reversal and loss, of breakdown of structures in this country since the 1960s; of social and cultural fragmentation, of public alienation from politics and government; and of erosion of optimism and belief in progress" (p. 6). The press^Òs failure, he says, is due largely to "the ascendancy of the corporate profit imperative in the news business, which demands of the press that instead of considering the argument for combating social fragmentation, it figure out how to profit from it" (p. 171).

The great value of *Republic of Denial* is found in Janeway^Òs carefully considered treatment of the symbiotic relationships between governance and journalism. Although journalists profess to have an arms-length, adversarial relationship with government and other sources of societal power, the corporate bosses of most mainstream news organizations are themselves part of the power elite. The wall that should separate those who make and those who cover the news is in bad

repair. Not coincidentally, the wall between the business and editorial functions of news organizations has also suffered great damage in recent years. Standards have become frayed, and many members of the public --far more perceptive than they are given credit for -- have responded by disconnecting themselves from institutions in which they have shrinking faith. Healthy skepticism has been superseded by cancerous cynicism. Such disengagement is a real danger to a democratic society because it fosters an expanding separation between those who govern and those who are governed. That is just the kind of thing that the press should be examining. Solid news coverage might wake up the public and spur the search for remedies.

Janeway's criticisms of specific press practices are mostly thoughtful. He notes the dangers of "objectivity," as when reporters covering Senator Joseph McCarthy simply reported what he said, the news rather than the truth. Janeway also joins the chorus of critics of "character" coverage, noting the "moral ambiguities inherent in digging for news in a disintegrating political environment, with only the vaguest of boundaries between public and private spheres" (p. 98). His point is well taken if "the character issue" is limited to politicians' sex lives, but there is more to character than that. The press should cover the complexities of character because people want and need to know about the background, standards, and motivations of those who seek their votes. Although some news organizations offer nothing more than dressed-up tabloid fare, others try to provide meaningful examinations of candidates' character, and their efforts should not be dismissed. Overall, however, Janeway's diagnosis of the ills of news coverage is better reasoned and more sophisticated than the work of most press critics. He cites, for example, "journalism's awkwardness with nuance," (p. 102) which leads to simplistic reporting about complicated topics. Much of the resulting journalism is

neatly packaged mush, which the public is likely to sample briefly and then abandon.

The larger failure of the news media (and of lazy news consumers) is the willingness, even eagerness, to concentrate on the simplest, most sensational story of the moment rather than summoning the intellectual energy needed to cover and consider larger, more important matters. Janeway says, "It's a form of national blindness to avoid the paramount issues in the land --political and governmental dysfunction, economic polarization, deepening racial division and resegregation, cultural disintegration -- and to find solace, as the nation did for most of the 1990s, in cyberrecreation and passing boom times" (p. 172). Those are strong words, but they need to be said, and Michael Janeway says them well.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Philip Seib. Review of Janeway, Michael. *Republic of Denial: Press, Politics and Public Life*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3686>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.