

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Baranowski. *Navigating the News: A Political Media User's Guide*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 2013. 173 pp. \$37.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4408-0321-5; ISBN 978-1-4408-0322-2.

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How to Watch the News

Navigating the News offers a crisp, readable, and thorough primer on how to be an informed consumer of political news, with particular attention to television. It would serve as a useful volume for the general reader and would be a fine choice for any undergraduate course interested in political-media literacy. It draws upon state-of-the-art research in political science and, to a lesser extent, psychology and communication studies. Overall, it is a highly useful synthesis, rather than a work of original research. But that's not to dismiss its many virtues.

The volume begins with an overview of what we know about where Americans get their news about politics, comparing audiences of print, television, radio, and online sources. The book offers a general overview of the bigger players, before making the extended case that the medium does matter and, all else equal, television and web-based sources are indeed inferior to print if we are interested in depth of knowledge, comprehension, and retention. The research in the area is limited and generally new, and the conclusions are couched in appropriately cautious terms.

Chapter 4, "Bias," is where the book becomes especially useful. Baranowski offers a throughgoing review of the flaws endemic to political news, starting with the pitfalls of ideological biases. But he then recounts the other forces that shape and constrain news-making, moving from the (age-old) bias toward novelty (what James Fallows used to call the preference for the Urgent over the Important), toward the dramatic (and visually arresting), for personality-driven stories, for supposed "bal-

ance" over truth (or what the weight of evidence shows), for speed over accuracy (especially pernicious with a now-constant news cycle), and the distorting effects of profit-seeking. Again, there will be nothing new here for anyone who has read and thought about these issues before, but they are presented clearly, concisely, and accessibly.

The next chapter moves from the biases of new producers to the biases of audiences, outlining how an ill-informed public judges news sources based on their physical appearance, how our group identity blinds us to other perspectives, our predilection for a good narrative over data-driven analyses, our yearning for simple answers over contingent and complex explanations, and the now well-documented effects of confirmation bias.

Chapter 6 offers readers an equally lucid tour through the most common logical fallacies that can misinform viewers, readers, or listeners, walking us crisply through the appeal to emotion, hasty generalization, argument by innuendo, post hoc fallacies, straw man arguments, false analogies, proof by verbosity, appeal to authority, ad hominem attacks, false dichotomies, the slippery slope, and arguments from ignorance. Once again, the book's virtue is its comprehensive but very concise review of the essential logical traps viewers or students should be aware of, with a well-chosen example or two for each.

Chapter 7 turns to numeracy, pointing out the most common and most egregious ways in which data are misused or misrepresented, with especially welcome at-

tention to sloppy or deceptive chart- and graph-making. Chapter 8 offers readers a review of the methodological features of modern opinion polling that can help us better interpret findings. The book concludes with two short final chapters that bring some of the previous material to-

gether into a handful of lessons about how to be a critical consumer of political news.

This is an introductory-level book, but while it doesn't go too deep (and does not presume to), it lays a solid foundation for further reading and thinking.

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