

**Robert Shogan.** *Bad News: Where the Press Goes Wrong in the Making of the President.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2001. x + 308 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56663-346-8.



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How the News Media Use and Misuse Power in Political Coverage

Robert Shogan has covered politics for three decades, first for *Newsweek* and then for the *Los Angeles Times*. He has also built an impressive body of work in his books about presidential leadership and presidential character. *Bad News* is another valuable volume, presenting concise but thoughtful analysis of the news coverage of presidential campaigns from 1968 through 2000.

Shogan identifies consistent failings in this coverage. He cites journalists' bad habit of "overstating the importance of some events and missing the significance of others" (p. 72). This, when coupled with the failure to provide context, is a disservice to the public, which could use the news media's help in figuring out what is going on in a campaign.

The news media, writes Shogan, "have served mainly as a conduit for events and [as] potent instruments in the hands of others" (p. 6). This is a point that Shogan makes repeatedly -- that journalists are manipulated by candidates and their handlers who use news coverage as a convenient

vehicle for delivering neatly packaged events and sound bites, and as a forum for charges and countercharges. This problem has worsened in the age of real-time news. Speedy reporting increasingly supersedes thorough reporting.

This can be seen in coverage of "the character issue," which has always been a factor in campaigns but has recently centered on politicians' sex lives. These stories, with their tabloid-style luridness, can quickly dominate campaign news, forcing out more substantive matters. The latest revelation is breathlessly presented to an audience that news organizations assume wants more and more.

This kind of reporting is flawed in several ways. First, the public's appetite for sleaze is probably overrated. More important, journalists usually fail to explain why character matters -- how personal weakness can affect public performance. The coverage of Gary Hart in 1987, writes Shogan, "left a residue of confusion over the political significance of character that would plague both candidates and the press in campaigns to come" (p. 141). Most news organizations have still not deter-

mined how character is to be covered responsibly. Shogan cites the 1996 case involving Bob Dole's extramarital affair that had occurred nearly thirty years before (p. 194) as an example of this uncertainty, which has yet to be resolved in the aftermath of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

Reasons for news media missteps can be offered, but most are unconvincing. Deadline pressure, writes Shogan, "forces journalism into exaggeration. Events that don't really matter are reported and published as if they did, distorting reality and confusing the public" (p. 256). Of course, news organizations could do a better job of resisting that pressure.

Implicit in Shogan's recital of sins is the case for improved professional self-discipline on the part of journalists. That is a message that is worth taking seriously not only by people now in the news business, but also by the next generation of journalists (and those who teach them).

Journalists' performance in the 2000 campaign and its aftermath receives a particularly scorching appraisal from Shogan. He calls that year's reporting "probably the worst performance in presidential coverage since the emergence of the new political order four decades earlier" (p. 242). That is debatable; 1988 comes to mind as perhaps an even worse case of journalistic sloppiness.

But Shogan's basic point remains valid: news coverage should be more than a tool wielded by politicians for their own purposes. Journalists might remind themselves that the best result of political reporting is an interested, knowledgeable voter.

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