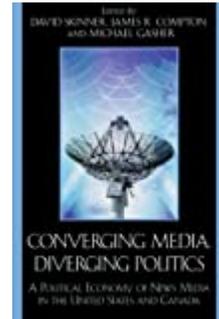


# H-Net Reviews

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**David Skinner, James R. Compton, Michael Gasher, eds.** *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of News Media in the United States and Canada.* MD: Lexington Books, 2005. x + 352 pp. \$88.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0827-7; \$38.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-1306-6.



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## Imagining a News Media That Does More

Imagine a world where the news media, in all its formats and mediums, truly services the needs of its audiences by offering a range of perspectives and a diversity of ideas. Try imagining one where journalists aren't bullied into editorial compliance, or where the interests of civil society govern the production and dissemination of news content, rather than the interests of owners, shareholders and advertisers. Such a vision informs the recent collection, *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of News Media in the United States and Canada*, edited by David Skinner, James Compton and Michael Gasher. As the title suggests, the collection considers how convergence—at the level of markets, technology, corporate organization, and labor—along with a growing deregulated policy environment, the rise of global digital capitalism, and huge vertically and horizontally integrated media mergers undermine the values of democratic communication media. The editors and authors understand journalism as the bedrock of democratic communication, making the implications of these larger factors considerable. The question of what/who journalism is for and how it serves its economic (advertisers, owners, newswriters), political (politicians), and

social stakeholders (citizens, consumers), is at the heart of this collection. This is not surprising considering the particular research interests of these three editors. In their words, “corporate concentration and media convergence present significant challenges to the viability of the public-service ideal in the communication realm, and to journalism’s ability to serve democracy” (p. 293).

Given its commitment to a consideration of the news media through political economy, the essays in this collection assume that factors such as ownership of media (and its capitalist structure), the state’s ability establish a regulatory environment, and the digitization and networking of information systems play a determining role in the nature, scope and forms of the production, dissemination, and consumption of the news. The results of these conditions, the collection concludes, create a diminished public sphere with less information, diversity of opinion, and a shift in patterns of representation.

To consider the consequences of convergence, the editors have conceived of the collection in three sections. The first section (including the introduction and chapters 2-3) describes the changing policy, technolog-

ical and economic conditions in both the United States and Canada, and their effects on news production. The collection then presents case studies of the current policy environment in radio, newspaper, and on the Internet. Finally, chapters eight through thirteen consider instances of resistance to corporate and hegemonic news media.

The introduction does an admirable job of “mapping the threads” of these complicated conditions in a way that lays out the stakes for audiences and democratic communication. Chapters 2 and 3 provide further details on these threads in the American and Canadian environments, respectively. “U.S. Media Policy Then and Now,” by Robert Horwitz, carefully tracks the complicated nexus of judicial rulings, changing political leadership, social science data, and First Amendment rights of corporations that make up the context of ongoing battles over media ownership ever since the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) relaxed its rules in June 2003. In “So Much by So Few: Media Policy and Ownership in Canada,” editors Skinner and Gasher argue that Canadian media policy has been dominated historically by an ethic of public service that grew out of nationalist concerns for protecting and enhancing Canadian culture, and which served to “curb creeping commercialism” (p. 71). In recent years, however, under new conditions of deregulation, privatization, deficit reduction, and technological innovation, this rationale has come under attack and ownership issues remain contentious for citizens and regulators alike.

The second section details case studies of different media companies that have profited from the deregulated or unregulated policy environment. Dorothy Kidd, Francisco McGee and Danielle Fairbairn detail the consequences of Clear Channel’s hold over half the general adult listening population by examining its programming and service to its communities (p. 77). The essay also notes interesting instances of resistance amongst local creative communities negatively affected by Clear Channel’s programming approaches—a theme that re-emerges in the final chapters of the collection. Chris Paterson shows how surprisingly little diversity there is on Internet news sites in his essay, “News Agency Dominance in International News on the Internet.” Paterson concludes that convergence has allowed Internet news sites to reproduce news derived mostly from major international agencies with very little editing or contextualization.

Mark Cooper, in “Hyper-commercialization and the Media: The Threat to Journalism and Democratic Dis-

course,” offers a detailed literature review of research on convergence and commercialization. Some of this research concludes that the focus on circulation quantity over quality has led to changes in content, with a greater focus on soft stories, and stories that have been market-tested to appeal to the “right” demographic. This shift has impacted labor conditions for newswriters through rationalizations of time spent gathering and producing news in both print and broadcast. Leslie Regan Shade’s “Aspergate: Concentration, Convergence and Censorship in Canadian Media,” has a similar focus on concentration and consolidation. Shade describes how the \$3.5-billion (CDN) takeover of Southam’s newspapers by CanWest in July 2000 led to a loss of local news coverage and increased use of repurposed “information” across multiple media platforms, turning journalism into information management. The research in these latter two articles demonstrates the validity of concerns about corporate concentration decreasing local content and a diversity of opinions, especially when companies adopt policies on running centralized editorials across disparate markets and communities “as if the two communities had the same concerns” (p. 123) and with considerable loss to journalistic freedom (pp. 102-105).

Despite the overwhelmingly negative impacts of corporate, technological, and economic convergence, especially in cross-media situations, the collection offers readers some hope of change in the final section on practices of resistance. The first two sections suggest that the route to change is through the reform of existing systems through policy change, while the final section locates its politics elsewhere. It delineates alternative media practices that challenge and sometimes undermine the hegemony of corporate media. This final section breathes new life into the occasionally predictable arguments in the previous sections by considering power from a different perspective—at the level of what citizen-audiences do with their media and in civil society. While the earlier sections presume what audiences need and how they (should) respond, this section actually examines them in action—on the streets and in their homes.

For instance, essays by Ben Scott (chapter 9), Dorothy Kidd (chapter 10), Nick Dyer-Witthford (chapter 13) and Michel SÃ©cal and Frédéric Dubois (chapter 12) all examine the mobilization of citizen groups in response to changing media policies (Scott and Kidd), the intersection of media concerns with other issues of social justice (Dyer-Witthford), and the efforts to establish and protect the conditions for producing alternative media forms (Dyer-Witthford and SÃ©cal and Dubois).

The Canadian scene has been particularly active in this regard, with many groups emerging out of the counter-globalization movements. Dyer-Witheford argues, for instance, that the development of Independent Media Centers (IMCs), and the “do-it-yourself” tactics and sensibilities that characterized the ground level media reports produced by IMCs, created a rift between this approach and the earlier net activist movements out of which it had grown. Those movements, which varied from social justice groups to counterglobalization and alternative media groups, favored more traditional approaches that emphasized reforming the system (like protesting or alternative town halls, as Kidd documents), rather than subverting or circumventing it altogether. Assessing the relative benefits and drawbacks of both approaches, these four essays suggest that while traditional means are a necessary and a still valuable way of engaging multiple publics in the debates about what their media should provide for them, net activism, and alternative media forms that focus on underreported or missed events in mainstream reportage are equally important. Alternative forms are inherently decentralized and build on the principles of plurality by encouraging media production by average, engaged citizens, not disinterested journalists. Judging by recent news reports of the efforts made by mainstream news organizations like CNN to incorporate more citizen-produced footage of news events on their websites, the work of IMCs has produced yet under-realized cultural effects on the processes of news production.[1]

Debra Clarke argues in her chapter that audiences are fully aware of the influences the news production processes have on the kinds of news texts they produce. Based on interviews, diaries, and participant observation, Clarke’s unique and important methodology leads her to conclude that critically engaged audiences aren’t necessarily also civically engaged, a crucial distinction that adds empirical weight to the arguments made in the first sections. Finally, Jeanette McVicker examines the changing role of the university in global capitalism and the status of journalism education within this network. In perhaps the most provocative and paradigm-altering essay in this collection, McVicker challenges journalism educators to not only consider the implications of a transdisciplinary program of study for emerging journalists, but also to rethink the very role journalism plays in liberal humanist democracy. The reforms proposed by McVicker do more than tackle external factors that impinge on the journalistic practice while leaving intact more profound philosophical underpinnings of journalistic practice: the institutional ties of journalism to a

nation-state under crisis; an embattled notion of civic duty in a globalized environment that demands different skills and modes of participation; and, sets of practices that continue to buttress dominant social groupings by failing to give voice to the complexities inherent to many events. Complex and nuanced, McVicker’s article stands alone in examining the larger philosophical principles that underwrite most of what is assumed in this collection: what is journalism supposed to do within these new conditions? While reforming the conditions of convergence would address many issues raised by the authors and critics, the question of journalistic practices that favor particular patterns of representation, or rely on dominant social groupings as authoritative sources, would still remain. Even though alternative forms address some of these issues, the nature of their ad-hoc production can introduce other issues of reliability, quality of production, and balance. Only the kind of reform that McVicker proposes (at least in terms of the scope of this collection) would address such issues since it maintains the best of journalistic principles and practices.

Although convergence is not a new phenomenon, what is new are the economic, policy, political and social environments in which it operates. This collection does a stellar job of stressing the first three, but it fails to equally interrogate the latter component. For example, as Marc Raboy recently argued, as technology and politics have changed, the very nature of the public sphere itself also changed.[2] This phenomenon, as well as the resulting new forms of mediation and issues around questions of representation, deserves some attention. The conclusion could have considered other journalistic models for reform—discussions of blogging and civic journalism are curiously absent, for instance. Further, key terms like “democratic communication” could have used some discussion. Had the collection taken a stronger editorial stand by formally sectioning the essays and introducing each section by thematically linking and engaging the arguments presented in the essays, these issues might have been avoided. Despite these relatively minor shortcomings, the collection would make a fine addition to a syllabus on the news media or a course on political economy. Although the calibre of the essays is somewhat unequal, the collection does an excellent job of describing the conditions that underwrite the urgency with which this collection is presented. It brings together important research that moves beyond documenting a crucial historical period; it also bravely and actively engages a politicized vision for a news media system that could do more. There is no reason why we should expect less.

## Notes

[1]. "News organizations embrace uploads from internet generation," CBC.ca. 01 Aug. 2006, www.cbc.ca/story/arts/national/2006/08/01/citizen-

journalists.html.

[2]. Marc Raboy, "Making Media: Creating the Conditions for Communication in the Public Good," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 21:2 (2006): pp. 289-306.

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