Book review: Stephen Cushion and Richard Thomas, *Reporting Elections. Rethinking the Logic of Campaign Coverage,* Cambridge, Polity, 2018, 222 pages, £15.99. ISBN: 978-1-5095-1750-3

Discussions focussing on the media coverage of elections have intensified in recent years. In the light of the Trump victory in the 2016 US Presidential election, there was heavy criticism of that election’s coverage, which many thought focussed too heavily on Hilary Clinton’s email woes, thus seemingly giving equal weight to the many scandals Trump was embroiled in throughout the campaign. In the UK, the Brexit election also drew criticisms of its coverage due to the fact that some felt outlets like the BBC were too focussed on ‘balance’, inviting people from both the Leave and Remain camps on to discuss the referendum without talking about the broader implications of exiting and also for overlooking key questions such as what an exit would mean for the Irish border. More recently, the coverage from the 2019 election has been similarly criticised. Researchers at Loughborough (Loughborough Media Centre, 2019) found that the coverage of The Labour Party was the most hostile since they began covering elections in 1992 and many felt that Boris Johnson was too easily allowed to escape scrutiny. Critiquing the way elections are covered by the media is critical due to the potential implications it has for the outcome of the elections, and therefore democracy more broadly. All this then, makes *Reporting Elections: Rethinking the Logic of Campaign Coverage* by Stephen Cushion and Richard Thomas an important text for these times.

In the introduction, the authors lay out the key outsights in the current literature, which they are seeking to address. These are that a) scholarship in this area should move towards a content-focussed approach and b) that there is a lack of research covering elections outside of the US, or campaigns which are not related to first order elections. Subsequently, as they point out, ‘our understanding of news agendas in different types of electoral contests, across media systems and between political cultures of levels of voter engagement is limited’ (p. 23). With the first two substantive chapters, the book does an excellent job of synthesising the current literature on agenda-setting, editorial decisions, the tension between political and media logic in campaign reporting and outlining the dominance of coverage that focuses on the process of the election rather than substantive policy. These chapters are ideal texts for students of election reporting and political coverage in general.

In particular, the cross–county comparisons in chapter two are fascinating and the content-based approach the authors take allows them to reveal the fact that it is primarily public service broadcasters advancing coverage, which does something other than frame elections as a ‘strategic game’ (p. 60). This is an important finding and the authors make a sound case within their broader arguments about election coverage and democratic health, of defending the public service broadcaster as essential to a better-informed electorate.

Chapter three offers a considerate and much-needed critique of the rapid expansion of poll-driven and ‘horse race’ coverage. The authors argue that, as polls have the potential to more fully and accurately capture ‘the mood’ of the electorate in a way that is less subjective than the traditional *vox populi*, they have the potential to inform journalists and editors in shaping the output of their election coverage around the wants and interests of the public. However, as the authors meticulously point out, the use of polling in election coverage rarely takes this opportunity, instead focussing on the ‘horserace’ and what public opinion this means for politicians and their careers. This means that the potential for policy-driven polling coverage that caters to citizen interest is lost as outlets revert to media logic.

Chapter four gives a comprehensive overview of the definitions of and debates that surround the similarities and differences between impartiality, objectivity and balance. Furthermore, the authors expand the debate on news values, making the well-founded and well-supported argument that although news values appear to be politically neutral on the surface, in practice this approach to choosing the news is rarely so. They argue their case persuasively and clearly, citing examples and quotes from those who have worked for parties and news organisations. The fact that the more controversial and combative figures in politics tend to the Right means selecting based on media logic (i.e. sensation and spectacle) can inadvertently give them an edge. Furthermore, they cite the fact that as the Press in the UK are largely right-wing, and as they often set the agenda that guides news values, this will clearly have an effect on what leads the news and what stories / issues citizens therefore think about. The argument is persuasive in the UK context (and, as the authors point out, is likely to be applicable to the highly partisan cable news channels in the US). However, some broader discussion of how applicable this might be to other contexts where the press is not so biased, would have been of value, particularly in light of their broader argument that cross-country comparisons are needed in this area.

For chapter five, the final substantive chapter, the authors introduce original analysis on what they call the ‘Trumpification of News’. This chapter expands upon the authors’ arguments in the previous chapter that news values can tend Right as the contentious candidates also tend to come from the Right (e.g. Nigel, Farage, Trump). The authors highlight a quote from Thomas Patterson which states ‘Reporters are attracted to the new, the unusual, the sensational, the outrageous. Trump fit that interest…(and) is arguably the first bona fide media-created presidential nominee. The politics of outrage was his edge and the press became his dependable if unwitting ally’ (p. 147). In other words, journalists were in thrall of Trump, knew it was good for business and were not so keen to question their potential role in legitimising him via their coverage. The authors furthermore outline that much of the coverage of the 2016 US election attempted to provide ‘balance’, while erroneously interpreting the concept. This led to them giving equal time to Clinton’s one scandal (her emails) versus Trump’s many. Quoting Patterson again, they state that this meant that ‘Trump wallowed in a cascade of separate controversies, Clinton’s badgering had a laser-like focus’ (p. 156). Cushion and Thomas add to the thinking here by outlining their conception of ‘Trump logic’, which they believe departs from the earlier dichotomy often cited in the political vs media logic literature (Esser, 2013). They state that whereas before it was assumed that politicians wanted to talk about policy, here Trump disrupts that by not even pretending to want to focus on policy and detail and instead actively shirking it, always striving to get the conversation back to process (e.g. Drain the Swamp).

In the conclusions the authors bring together the research outlined in the earlier chapters to suggest some new ways that thinking of reporting elections might be approached in future work. They suggest that a rejection of the political / media logic is overdue as within these categories there is no one logic so the separation is ‘ultimately fruitless’ (p. 165). They suggest that ‘market driven media logic’ would be more precise and accurate especially in light of Trump obsessing over process and parties in the UK promoting media logic if it suits their campaign. As this dichotomy gets fuzzier, they argue, a more nuanced and precise measure is needed. They furthermore call for a ‘weight of evidence’ (p. 182) approach to balance and objectivity, moving away from the ersatz and partisan ‘he said, she said’ version we tend to get now in favour of featuring experts and the citing of independent research. The authors claim, again persuasively, that this would better serve the democratic needs of the citizens and promote a better-informed electorate.

Overall, chapters one to four do a fine job of bringing together existing research. These chapters are so clear and lucid in the concepts and evidence they present that this is an invaluable key text for scholars new to this topic or as a resource for teaching. The last two chapters go beyond this to extend the field and offer new evidence and fresh thinking, thus providing plenty of food for thought for those of us who study elections, political communication, and news. Overall, *Reporting Elections* is a valuable text for anyone who is interested in or studies the media and politics.

References

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