

The Media by Keith Windschuttle

(Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1984) p. xi + 436, \$12.95, ISBN: 0-14-006848-1.

There is little agreement how the analysis of media, let alone of information or communication, ought to be approached. What the basic issues are, how far media can be studied apart from a theory of society, what methods are proper, and what is to count as evidence are all contested.

Hence, there are many attempts to handle this messy field. Fads and fashions; rival dogmas; approaches mainly concerned with applying a crude technique, are common. Scholars in areas with more certainty, or, more likely, with a higher proportion of agreement as what is to be certified and how as probable, what is to have the stamp of 'knowledge', have another option: They can 'apply' their concepts and techniques *to* media. But very often (consider the economics of information or linguistics and discourse analysis) this may lead to challenges to the received wisdom they started off from.

For those who do not share the perspective just sketched, Windschuttle's book is almost perfect for knocking. The author has a varied background — journalist, activist, academic, social historian — which, in one form or another, permeates the work. He does not stick to one role. He has picked up ideas and methods from a variety of experiences.

The book is sprawling and messy. But to characterise it as such is one thing, to imply it should have been other is in itself an ideological preference as to how media should be studied, which needs defence and is not self-evident.

It is rather misleading to describe the content: In Part I five chapters deal with ownership, structure, and the economics of the press, TV and radio. (The economics are not those of an Allan Brown.) The future and advertising are also looked at. This is the most orthodox part. It is a useful and lively summary, with the almost inevitable slips and no attempt to set oligopoly in media into a more general perspective about Australian markets.

Part II deals with culture in a rather mixed bag of TV, radio, advertising. The press, as such, has vanished, and we get a cliché laden and jejune treatment of magazines which turns out to be pop psychology about women's magazines, plus a better chapter on 'news as myth'. Part III labelled 'hegemony' deals with content as related to class, the new right and deregulation, advertising self-regulation and reform and diversity.

The hard data go to mid 1982. In a second edition — the first had to be withdrawn due to a defamation action — there is a chance of updating the material, especially as to TV ownership, and the impact of the satellite and the changing more controversial role of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and the work now emerging on the politics of defamation. The book also needs another basic data check, there are a few sloppy spots which need fixing.

The major strength of the book is in its display of the author's lively mind. He is too prone to imply that his imaginative hunches have in some sense been 'established' by offering a few random instances. But, if they are not taken that way, they remain worthwhile suggestions for research. Thus he wants to show that, while maybe working class people are uncommon in the content of print media, this is not true of TV. It is important for him to do so for he wants to link that point with his general view as to why workers watch so much TV which others describe as trivial and mind-rotting and which he does not wish to characterise that way.

So TV 'is anything but the field of middle class culture. 'Working class people are not only *frequently* (emphasis supplied) the centre of television programmes and series but *many* (emphasis supplied) of these shows are located squarely at the point of production, that is, in the workplace . . .'. We are told that without research he can give top of the head examples and for this and related groups, he does furnish eighteen of these (pp. 159-160).

How is one to treat this? One can ask what proportion of what kind of shows over how many years would be 'frequent' or 'many'. One can look at their origins and ask how many came from the BBC, so maybe what is true of their shows is less true of commercial ones? One can quarrel with shows given set in working class households as linked to material 'located squarely at the point of production'. And so on. Yet to take this sort of line, since the spadework has not been done, would be to deny Windschuttle's right to raise a point and, as they say, to 'make you think'.

In most chapters there are many similar instances. Taken together they will provoke irritation and sneers or approval with a cocked eyebrow. We have deliberately left little space for the underlying theoretical content, clearly important to the author. It has to do with how far and in what ways mass media reflect, distort, and reproduce the work, class and history related experience of workers, the way they exploit their needs yet do not ignore them. This supposedly accounts for the popularity of the media. The trouble is that this notion is nowhere clearly worked out properly and, clearly, what is being asserted changes from chapter to chapter. It is not clear how far this is supposed to apply to most of what is in the newspapers or to radio or top magazines where a different explanation is put forward.

The whole concept of needs is treated uncritically. How is it related to history and culture? Is it really possible to distinguish pure from distorted needs? Agnes Heller's *The Theory of Needs in Marx* (1976) and Patricia Springborg's *The Problem of Human Needs and the Critique of Civilization* (1981) discuss such issues.

Finally, Windschuttle is, in spite of his interest in history, very ethnocentric. He is not sufficiently aware of the variety of media options in different nations, all capitalist. Nor does he ponder why the first US program on Chinese TV was *The Man From Atlantis*. Could it be that all social systems, in various ways, both utilise mass 'needs' and 'distort' and 'exploit' them? If so, what would be the implications?

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REFERENCES

1. Allan Brown, 'Diversity, economics and the Australian newspaper industry', *Prometheus*, 1, 1, June 1983, pp. 42-59.