

Making Media Content: The Influence of Constituency Groups on Mass Media. By John A. Fortunato. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005, xv, 232p. (cloth) ISBN-10: 0-8058-4748-0; ISBN-13: 978-0-8058-4748-2.

As an entry point to examining the central question *Making Media Content* addresses within the landscape of communication scholarship, it is helpful to acknowledge the work of C. Wright Mills (1956), who observed more than 50 years ago that:

The media display an apparent variety and competition, but on closer view they seem to compete more in terms of variations on a few standardized themes than of clashing issues. The freedom to raise issues effectively seems more and more to be confined to those few interests that have ready and continual access to these media. (313-314)

Mills anticipated more than just an analysis of today's mass media in *The Power Elite*, and the above passage hones in on an important overarching question about commercial media ownership and the content created for its audiences. Is the commercial media both *reasonably competitive* in its creation of news and *reasonably inclusive* in terms of its access for constituency groups to influence news?

The way a researcher sees the world, whether she or he concurs with Mills or not, is relevant to a review of John Fortunato's book. Media scholars and activists have argued extensively about the problems of media ownership in America and globally as part of the larger media reform movement, but *Making Media Content* does not ultimately conclude that the commercial system is characterized by a lack of competition or barriers to access. Fortunato explains his book's purpose is "to examine the complex decision-making process of national mass media organizations in determining what news content to put on the air, in print, or on an Internet site" (p.4).

By marrying a review of theoretical work on the media with practitioner perspectives to "create a more complete explanation of the decision-making process" (p. xii), Fortunato offers an alternative and decidedly market-driven vantage point from which to consider the media consolidation question, although this is not his stated aim. There are some compelling elements to the book's purpose and goal, and the work is broken into three sections to address "Media Powers," "The Internal Mass Media Organization," and "The External Mass Media Organization: Constituency Groups." The book's structure alone is worthy of praise because it establishes the premise that looking at these three factors in the production of media con-

tent might offer some definitive understanding of the processes as tested against the theoretical.

Fortunato links literature concerning media dependency, uses and gratifications, selection, framing and agenda setting to build the case for the powers of the media. He follows this foundation with a discussion of how decisions are made within media organizations, first with media routines and branding, and then with the economic factors contributing to the process with an overview of literature on media ownership and political economy. The book concludes by turning toward a discussion of the constituency groups influencing media content with a look at news sources and the public relations function. The final section concludes with an examination of why the audience plays such an important role in tandem with content providers in guiding the decisions news organization make about what they ultimately deliver.

Returning to why Mills' scholarly contribution matters so much, *Making Media Content's* data set consists of respondent interviews with practitioners who either themselves hold a rather elite pedigree or owe their livelihoods to those who do. Affiliations of respondents include an executive editor at *Sports Illustrated*, a New Jersey U.S. Senator's director of communication, a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the president of ABC News, a vice president and editor-in-chief of *usatoday.com*, and several other executives from large public relations and advertising firms. As such, the book serves as a sort of elite counterpoint to scholars who have raised concerns about media consolidation, and does perhaps more to defend the status quo by ultimately rejecting the ideal of a more democratic system as "too simplistic" (p. 201).

The goal of *Making Media Content* is "for people to learn something about how the mass media operate and to provide some insight into the complex processes of an important industry so that they can better evaluate what they are seeing, hearing, or reading" (p. xii). By placing the onus for the acceptance of media content squarely on the shoulders of the audience, Fortunato sees a free marketplace of ideas, not a structure of control and coercion by powerful and moneyed interests. For the author, the power and justification for a market-driven system comes from the audience and the interest it takes in the content. In fact, he affirms "trust in the audience is arguably the best characteristic of the marketplace of ideas concept in that it recognizes the ability to make a proper decision when presented with all the information" (p. 23).

The structure of the book suggests an inclusive scholarly path to explaining the realities of the production of media content, and indeed includes references from key scholars who have examined the political economy of the mass media and culture like Sut Jhally, Dennis Mazzocco, Robert McChesney, Eileen Meehan, Vincent Mosco, Herbert Schiller, and Dallas Smythe. This is strength because the book engages these other arguments even if it does not, in the end, agree with them.

However, Fortunato excludes the seminal Herman and Chomsky propaganda model, which arguably traverses terrain fairly similar to *Making Media Content*. Both are situated within the assumption that the relationship between the media and content providers merits study. Just as Fortunato argues that "the interdependent relationship between the mass media organization and content providers is at the

core in the evaluation of the complex content decision-making process” (p.131), the propaganda model’s third filter posits that “the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest” (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 18).

Chapter five is good discussion-starter. Fortunato highlights several reasons that commercial media ownership equates to neither complete control nor less competition. He points out that even with “corporate conglomeration, there are still five different corporations, six networks, presenting national news on television and competing for market share,” and that “there are few industries that have six brands viably competing for market share” (p. 104).

While Fortunato accepts that a more democratic system of making and distributing content is ideal in a perfect world, he warns that even if it existed “you cannot force people to participate in messages they do not want to waste their time watching or listening to,” (p. 201) and the author’s point is well taken. He claims that through their political economy approach, critical theorists are simply complaining about the media not reporting on “their perceived shortcomings of the capitalist system” and that these theorists essentially “call for more state control of the media industry.” For Fortunato, “it seems the state would have even more control over messages and the flow of information if the media were state run,” and that, “at least the current system has some form of independence and an allowance for the audience to make some determinations about the success or failure of media content” (p. 200).

For communication scholars who do not embrace the argument of C. Wright Mills, namely that elite interests control the commercial media through access and due to, at best, superficial competition, *Making Media Content* is a viable source work for defending the consolidating corporate media system. For those who embrace the critical perspective that media consolidation is a threat to democracy, Fortunato offers cause for continued debate within the marketplace of ideas.

Kyle F. Reinson
St. John Fisher College

References

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