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Book review: The Sound Bite Society: Television and the American Mind

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The central theme of the book – that American television is tailor-made for the simple ‘sound bite’ messages of the right and gives little coverage to liberals because their messages are more complex and don’t fit neatly into the formula – is hard to accept.

Scheuer also accuses TV of being responsible for the rise of the conservative right in US society.

That’s not to say that the author, who has written for the New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune doesn’t present a powerful and interesting argument. It’s just that reading at it from the other side of the Pacific, it’s a bit hard to cop.

Scheuer paints a fascinating picture of the impact of television on American society, but in this writer’s opinion draws conclusions too big to be justified by his evidence.

You also can’t help wondering why he and his colleagues at newspapers and magazines around the States are beavering away on their laptops if Larry King and Ted Koppel are the only notable information gatekeepers for the American people.

Put in a local context, if Laurie Oakes (veteran Australian political journalist) is the only one the public takes any notice of across Australia, what’s the point to his weekly column in The Bulletin?

While Channel 9 (Australian commercial network) consistently tells us that ‘more people get their news from Channel 9 that any other source’ surely they’re not suggesting they are the only source?

Scheuer canvasses all the traditional arguments against TV – how it manipulates the emotions, is a simplifier of the complex, numbs its audiences with social stereotypes and saturates them with the trivial and the superficial etc. But he also comes up with some wonderful lines, at one stage calling TV ‘a whore for profit‘ and accusing it of being the ‘main culprit’ for creating a society that is ‘dominated by money and profit, imagery and spin, hype and personality’.

He contends that TV thrives on the simple messages or ‘sound bites’ of right-wing politicians and is inept at showing the
more complex, long-term and institutional remedies that characterise liberalism. Throughout the text he preaches that it is only the liberals who can explain the complex issues facing American society, and because TV can’t handle the complex, they are virtually ignored by the ‘great communicator’.

If, as Scheuer contends (p122), simplification epitomises political conservatism, Australian Prime Minister John Howard could have done with his help in trying to sell the GST (Goods and Services Tax) in the first half of 2000. And former Australian Liberal Opposition leader, John Hewson some years earlier.

Bill Clinton seems as adept as anyone at getting his message across on TV. This writer has just been watching him expressing himself rather well in the wake of the (July, 2000) G8 summit in Okinawa and some hours later on his return to Washington to try to pick up the threads of a faltering Middle East Summit.

In the traditional of ‘the medium is the message’, Scheuer begins by telling his readers that ‘Television doesn’t just affect society; to a great extent, it is society.’

Nice line, but after another 180+ pages, it doesn’t wash.

There are a number of equally-interesting lines like: ‘If a tree falls in the political forest but isn’t televised, it in effect remains standing’.

Too often, though, Scheuer seems to take his point too far for his evidence to sustain. At one stage he makes the point that ‘pictures can lie outright’. OK, yes, sometimes they can, but then he adds: ‘And given the chance and commercial incentive, they surely will’. He’s spent too long at Media Conspiracy School.

He says (p22) that ‘no viewer is a purely passive tablet on which media imprint their messages and have their effects’, but seems to go on for the next 170+ pages trying to convince his readers that they are.

Aside from not being entirely convinced by his central argument, there is much in this volume that will give you cause to think.

While conservative governments in Australia often accuse journalists of having a left-wing bias, and Labor governments attack the media for being ‘too liberal’, Scheuer contends (p28) that if the American media is composed of liberals, they are self-hating liberals. Elsewhere (p34) he says that news reporters are terrified of being branded as “liberals”. He even admits that journalists are more liberal in their personal views than the rest of society, but goes on to maintain that they support the right wing of the political spectrum.

He draws attention to what he sees as TV’s ‘glorification of law-enforcement personnel’. While this might be true of the ‘fly on the wall’ infotainment programs that rely on police for their
content (following them on raids, car chases etc), what about the
Rodney King video, the trial of those New York police who riddled
an innocent black with bullets and more recently the spectacular
coverage of the beating and arrest of an alleged cop car-jacker by
some of Philadelphia’s finest ‘men in blue’?

Many would agree when he states that TV imparts a
perception that the world is a more dangerous place that it actually
is. I’ve often pondered what will happen in 50 years’ time (or
whenever) when society digs up those time capsules and watches
the coverage of all those stabbings, shootings and robberies – the
fodder of so much of the nightly TV news. What will succeeding
generations think of our society at the turn of the century?

Scheuer really warms to his central thesis late in the book
when he suggests that: ‘TV news budgets pay for hair styling and
traffic helicopters, not for social theorists to explore the complexities
of human events’. Ouch! You can almost see the wry smiles in
newsrooms across America, and in Australia, for that matter.

Towards the end of his book, Scheuer has some advice for
journalism educators that few would challenge: we should teach
them to be better critics and consumers of journalism. Don’t we
all lament how difficult it is to get our students to watch TV or
read newspapers? More than 20 years of imposing regular current
affairs tests on my students and I still think I failed there.

‘Instead of just training and credentializing reporters,
producers, and Webmasters, universities should prepare them for
their wider role as educators’.

Sounds like a good idea to me.■