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InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Review: *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War, and Election Battles*
by Douglas Kellner

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zp7418h>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 2(1)

ISSN

1548-3320

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Publication Date

2006-02-09

DOI

10.5070/D421000562

Peer reviewed

Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War, and Election Battles by Douglas Kellner. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005. 267 pp. ISBN 1-59451-119-5

Brilliant or ignorant, foolish or cunning, however one wishes to describe the Bush administration, there is no doubt that this presidency has been both controversial and divisive. The media has been a significant force in determining public opinion about the administration and the American political landscape. In *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War, and Election Battles*, Douglas Kellner recounts the ways in which the Bush administration and the media have divided the country and the world into an imagined dichotomy between good and evil.

In this book, Kellner analyzes the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He presents and critiques how the Bush administration used the media as a resource, tool and weapon for gaining public support. Kellner consistently makes two points clear throughout the book. First, the Bush administration owes a significant part of its success to an uncritical and irresponsible media. Whether through intimidation, deceit, biased reporting or unsubstantiated commentary, the media has consistently presented one-sided and inaccurate depictions of the political landscape. Second, spectacular media images and stories, or as Keller terms it “media spectacle,” have become important factors in swaying public opinion and national politics in the 21st century. Kellner points out that, “The media in a democracy are supposed to provide facts and a wide range of opinions for an informed citizenry, debate issues of national importance, reject spin and lies, and hold leaders accountable for mistakes and wrong policies” (p. 39). However, the American media has been more obsessed with sensational stories and ratings than with journalistic integrity.

In support of his first point, Kellner argues that the media has failed to criticize George Bush since 2001, and despite evidence of egregious acts of deception, the media has consistently supported his presidency and endorsed the war in Iraq. For example, right wing broadcasting stations like Fox News have unequivocally endorsed Bush and his administrative team. Furthermore, less openly biased news programs such as those on the major networks and CNN also demonstrated preference for opinions from the right rather than the left through biased news accounts. For example, Kellner states that “...(d)uring the war on Afghanistan, top executives of CNN circulated a memo telling reporters that if they showed news unfavorable to the United States, such as civilian casualties from U.S. bombing there, they should remind viewers that thousand of Americans died in the 9/11 attacks” (p. 37). In effect, news programs made a conscious effort to rationalize or diminish the impact of civilian casualties abroad. Kellner

argues that this trend, coupled with media spectacle, greatly influenced political opinions across the nation, and especially influenced those with less political acumen.

Kellner offers a second critique of the media by highlighting its use of fear to draw viewers in and create a political panic. For instance, the media's use of inflammatory images and incendiary messages filled American television screens, radios, and print media. As Kellner points out, "The media thus served in a perverse way as instruments of Al Qaeda and terrorism, since one of the goals of terror attacks is to spread fear and anxiety" (p. 28). By exacerbating the fear and panic conjured by the September 11 terrorist attacks, these images and political messages, comparable to those used by the terrorists, moved a large percentage of the American public to support a unilateral attack on Iraq.

Ultimately, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* successfully depicts how media spectacle has impacted American politics by illustrating how the media can transform presidential elections and shape popular sentiment regarding government policy. Kellner's clear and captivating writing style makes the book accessible and especially provocative for those interested in the power of media, information studies, and political science. By avoiding complex terminology and theory, Kellner speaks to anyone who desires a greater understanding of contemporary American politics and the media.

Regrettably, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* has one significant weakness, which manifests itself in two distinct ways. Despite a convincing and well-supported argument that is critical of both the Bush administration and the media, Kellner ostensibly preaches to the choir—those stationed on the political left. This fact is confirmed primarily by his glaring reluctance to critique the political left. Although the book's introduction clearly expresses Kellner's sympathy towards the Democratic Party, the author quickly alienates those who hold moderate political views by comparing George W. Bush with Adolf Hitler. For example Kellner states that, "Like Hitler and German fascists, the Bush-Cheney clique use the Big Lie to promote its policies, promote aggressive militarism in the quest for world hegemony, and relentlessly promote economic interests of the corporations and groups that finance it" (p. xi). Many liberals find such a bold statement and comparison in this time of political correctness, quasi-patriotism and political conservatism refreshing. Sardonic leftists may concur with Kellner and argue that while both Bush and Hitler are evil, only one can be deemed a genius. While Kellner's argument strikes a chord with liberals, such comparisons, though well supported, leave those with moderate political views estranged from the book. Consequently, Kellner, like Bush, succeeds at polarizing his audience and prevents those on the right from approaching the book with an open mind.

Kellner's comparison of Bush to Hitler, coupled with his tendency to overlook mistakes made by the Democratic Party, provides critics with cause to categorize Kellner as akin to Michael Moore. Although Michael Moore has earned a significant following, his approach and tone has led critics to label his work as propaganda. Kellner does little to belie such criticisms as he states that "The Bush-Cheney Gang controls all of the higher institutions of the U.S. government, perpetuating a state apparatus dedicated to class warfare against the poor and dispossessed, and attempting to transfer as much wealth and power to the rich and corporate classes as possible" (p. xiv). His biting attacks on the Bush administration and reluctance to criticize the left prevent those who are politically undecided from seriously considering the compelling facts Kellner gathers and presents. If his criticisms were wider and subtler, a larger and more politically diverse audience might benefit from Kellner's work.

Despite this weakness, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* is an excellent account of American politics and the use of media spectacle at the dawn of the 21st century. Kellner's perceptive observations of political trends and electoral politics effectively dispel many commonly held myths about American politics, such as the perceived ineffectiveness of the Democratic push to rally more young people to vote during the 2004 election. Although he could do more to address the impact that capitalism has on the corporate media's decision to commit themselves to spectacle instead of objectivity, Kellner does effectively critique the resulting impact that such decisions have on the American public. Furthermore, Kellner illuminates the significance of uninformed patriots in the 2000 and 2004 elections, as well as the general political climate in the country.

Kellner's writing is clear, captivating, and provocative. In a time of great political insecurity, he brings a needed sense of urgency to our understanding of American politics and the media. He provides a comprehensive account of the political landscape between 2000 and 2004 and the Bush administration's use of the media as a political tool. But most importantly, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* captures a concern, felt by at least half of the American population, that there is a lack of journalistic integrity and objectivity in the American media. Kellner captures this concern when he states that the media is "Lost in the dimensions of entertainment, individuals are becoming less informed and more misinformed by the increasingly tabloidized corporate media" (p. xvi). This concern, coupled with an abundance of questionable political practices by the Bush administration during this turbulent and potentially pivotal time in American history, has left many American and global citizens with great discomfort about the future of America and peace in the Middle East.

Reviewer

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