

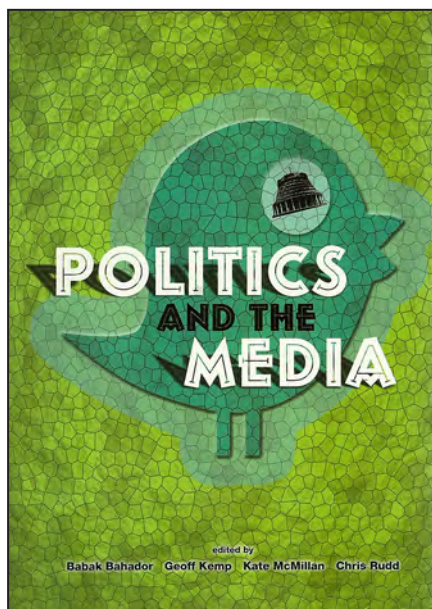
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Useful but flawed survey of media role in bleak political landscape

Politics and the Media, edited by Babak Bahador, Geoff Kemp, Kate McMillan and Chris Rudd. Auckland: Pearson, 2013. ISBN 978144255826

A GENERATION after the capitalist roaders took over the New Zealand Labour Party, the country's political landscape is bleak. As described in this new book, it is one in which no political party is interested in any ideology except staying in power, no party will do anything that might offend a focus group, PR hacks control policy, political party membership has all but disappeared, the public is almost totally disengaged and most of the media has neither the time, the skill nor the inclination to cover politics.

Much of this is the inevitable result of the way in which the major parties galloped towards the political



centre and embraced *laissez-faire* capitalism, thus destroying the previously existing political, social and economic fabric of the country. Much of it is also a result of New Zealand's history.

Unlike other civilised countries, New Zealand does not now have public broadcasting beyond radio. There have been long periods when the government thought it proper to write news bulletins, just as it thought it proper to tell people how many bricks they could use in a house or to decree that citizens must seek permission to import a magazine from overseas.

New Zealand has thus moved from the status of being a sort of East Germany of the South Seas to the last

bastion of Thatcherism in which such Blairite heresies as public-private partnerships are only now being considered, years after they proved to be a disaster in the United Kingdom.

Neither system seems to have welcomed the idea of a politically engaged media. It is against this dispiriting background that this extremely useful collection of essays attempts to provide a picture of how the media reports politics in New Zealand, the challenges and opportunities that might exist and the story of what has gone before. Alongside analyses of industry practice and realities, there are also a number of fruitful explorations of ways in which the interaction between the media and politics can be understood.

Applying traditional concepts of media and audience roles may not always be straightforward, especially when politics is concerned. As Rudd points out, with so many channels available, people can choose to watch more news, or less, or not watch at all. Such audience fragmentation or even the complete loss of an audience can make it very difficult to assess the impact of any media or political message and it may be almost impossible to apply the same techniques that once measured mass audiences. The loss of audiences also tempts the media towards populism, a trend Atkinson

notes in his discussion of New Zealand television news. Populism inevitably avoids meaningful reporting or engagement with political ideas in favour of the manufactured consensus to ‘common sense’.

Other areas are not so successfully explored. Kemp and Blomkamp’s chapter on politics, media and entertainment seems unfocussed and its targets uncertain. Rugby, for instance, could just as easily be presented as the opium of the New Zealand masses as much as a sign of national identity. They cite the funding of the very slightly amusing *Flight of the Conchords* as an example of a shift in the political economy of the media, but ignore *Diplomatic Immunity*, which was funny, overtly political and, in several instances, based on real events and real people.

There are occasional and very welcome excursions into the wider world. Bahador’s chapter looks at international broadcasting and the so-called CNN effect and the rise of Al Jazeera. He is right in seeing Al Jazeera as an expression of Qatari soft power, but might have usefully explored the use of international broadcasting by other countries—including New Zealand—for the same purposes. (He is wrong, incidentally, to imply that Al Jazeera was set up in opposition to the BBC, since the BBC

World television service did not then exist and Al Jazeera's first journalists were recruited from the ruins of the BBC's Saudi-funded Arabic service.)

If there is one criticism of this otherwise extremely useful book, it is that with some exceptions, it is the media's job essentially to report on the daily activities of politicians. It does not seem to be expected that the media has any responsibility to try to grapple with political ideology or explain to readers what the different parties stand for.

It seems to me that if the media is to be a responsible partner in the political process, then it must, as outlined in the first chapter of the book, fulfil an informational role. The media has the ability to play an important part in educating people about politics and making them realise its importance to them.

In other words, it has the potential to mobilise people, not in a partisan sense, but in the sense of making people see themselves as having the right, indeed the responsibility, to become politically active citizens.

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