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The Media Syndrome, by **David L. Altheide**. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. 234pp.
\$39.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781629581477.

Matthias Revers

In *The Media Syndrome*, David Altheide once more demonstrates the formative role of media in political processes through a number of important news stories and events, spanning over four decades of US history. The underlying theory, which Altheide initially formulated together with David Snow (1979), centers on how social institutions adapt to and incorporate parameters set by the media. This *media logic* perspective has become more current than ever in recent years and has triggered research on mediation/mediatization/medialization of societies and specific institutions. These works build on but criticize the assumption of a singular media logic for obscuring the fact that different media logics collide and assemble in varying configurations in the digital age (e.g. Hepp 2013). While nodding to these works, the book does not respond to this critique. Instead, it adheres to the singular media logic and appends it with a more transitory and multidimensional theoretical device *ecology of communication*, which “refers to the structure, organization, and accessibility of information technology, various forums, media and channels of information” (p. 8). Media logic, in turn, means “a form of communication, and the process through which media transmit and communicate information” (p. 8) but it sometimes also means technology (e.g. p. 4). Despite these conceptual ambiguities, Altheide’s overall diagnosis of the media syndrome is crystal clear: Exercising political power, though partly conditioned by institutional authority, increasingly involves the adoption of and adaption to the imperatives of the media. Turning media logic to account means influencing definitions of situations, collective meanings, policies, and sometime social order writ large. However, this “does not imply that everything can be easily controlled and manipulated, but only that the central media processes and logic will be implicated in most outcomes” (p. 194). The nine analytical chapters discuss how the media syndrome plays out, including in political campaigns and scandals (Watergate, the rise

and fall of Senator Thomas Eagleton), justice and crime (reality court shows, school shootings and domestic terrorism, the missing children problem), and war and international crises (the Iranian hostage crisis, Gulf War, Iraq War, terrorism, Wikileaks, Ebola, ISIS). In accordance with the scope of the argument, the empirical foundation is mostly discourse analysis of television and print news coverage, occasionally more structured content analysis, and interviews with journalists.

By the example of Senator Thomas Eagleton (chapter 2), Altheide shows how the fate of political careers may depend not only on topical preferences and emphases but also temporal rhythms of news making. In the case of the resignation of President Nixon after the Watergate scandal, he argues that the information revealed through investigative journalism was only one factor besides a more important one: continuous and eventually intense media attention and framing of the scandal. In chapter 3, Altheide shows that the way the American public related to the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979 and 1980 was conditioned by how the event connected to news media format requirements. Connections are defined by which dimensions of the issue are accessible for news reporting, which are topically, visually, and dramatically appealing, which are deemed relevant for the audience, and which can be encapsulated in a story that can be easily summarized and understood by preexistent cultural frames.

The reality court drama, which emerged in the 1990s, is what Altheide refers to as *gonzo justice* (chapter 4), which seeks to publicly celebrate and legitimate toughness against moral violations through the media. Gonzo justice is affected by media logic in terms of how stories of moral resolve are told and visually presented. Altheide then shows how the media sensationalism-fueled moral panic over child safety in the wake of child abduction cases helped to support criminal justice initiatives (chapter 5). This ongoing story, which emerged in the 1980s, was based on the confluence of dramatic representations of individual cases and continuous echoing of misrepresented statistics used to inflate the problem through various media channels.

The Gulf War of the early 1990s hailed a new era of war reporting (chapter 6) to Altheide. This era is not defined anymore by the denial of access but controlled provision of little and highly orchestrated access. This *post-journalism* broadcasting consists of a highly realistic and televised media spectacle which resembles the coverage of major sporting events. The degree of premediation and planning that had to occur for the media spectacle to happen illustrates the power of media logic. Promoted by the ongoing discourse of fear in the US, particularly regarding children, Altheide argues that news media reframed Columbine and other school shooting as acts of terrorism after 9/11 (chapter 7). This discursive formation was used to bolster argument for more policing and security, which were applied to ill-conceived preventative measures against terrorism and school violence alike. In chapter 8, Altheide refers to the lead-up to the Iraq War as “one of the most egregious propaganda campaigns in history” (p. 161). He shows how the lobbying group Project for a New American Century (PANC) was able to launch a carefully planned campaign for America going to war against Iraq with the help of news media and the intensified discourse of fear after 9/11. He further exposes the failure of journalism to reveal the involvement of PANC, which was distracted by the Bush administration’s own campaign and generally implicated by the post-journalistic situation “where there is no longer separation between event makers, event promoters, and event chroniclers” (p. 162).

Altheide blames the media syndrome for a public discourse after 9/11 in which consumption and donations were coded as acts of patriotism and joined with and utilized as a breeding ground for an increase of military spending (chapter 9). The collective victim status assumed by the American public, furthermore, resonated with a politics of fear in a way that willingly giving up civil liberties and adopting a spirit of vengeance became possible, which both fueled the war on terror. Altheide concludes the book with a chapter (10) dealing with mediated fear around surveillance, the Ebola epidemic, and ISIS and the challenges digital media provide for legacy news media.

Although the chapters—all published in part elsewhere before (except chapter 1 and 10)—were adapted and streamlined according to the central argument of the book, some conceptual distinctions could have been made more clearly. Besides the fact that the singularity of *media logic* becomes incongruous in the chapters that deal with the digital age, some concepts are used in ambiguous ways. For example, while *communication format* mostly refers to forms of mediated representation, it sometimes signifies platforms (like social media, see p. 199). That being said, this collection succeeds in telling a compelling story about how the transformation of mediated communication drove major changes in politics and public discourse of the United States over the last 50 years. This is particularly relevant in sociology, which has abandoned and is slowly taken up again the study of media. This book will be especially valuable in undergraduate classes focusing on media, political culture, and political communication.

References

- Altheide, David L, and Robert P Snow. 1979. *Media Logic*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Hepp, Andreas. 2013. *Cultures of Mediatization*. Cambridge: Polity.