



How the Mass Media Really Work: An Introduction to Their Role as Institutions of Control and Change

Taehyun Kim, Dan Erickson, David Demers

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More than two decades ago Professor Pamela J. Shoemaker reviewed 15 introduction to mass communication/media textbooks and concluded that their self-described purpose is to provide a global view of mass communication to neophytes, and their approach is largely descriptive. The textbooks contained little information about how media content (1) helps people, government and business leaders achieve their personal and professional goals and (2) reinforces dominant values and institutions. In other words, the textbooks have ignored or underplayed what sociologists call the social control function of the mass media. Drawing on decades of mass communication research as well as our own research, this book attempts to correct for these shortcomings. It shows that, contrary to popular wisdom, mass media and the content they produce play a crucial role in maintaining dominant values and social institutions. In simplifying terminology, media produce the thread that helps hold the fabric of modern society together. But the social control function does not mean mass media are simply lap dogs of powerful elites. Media produce, from time to time, content that is critical of dominant values and elites. That content can legitimize and promote ideas that benefit nonelite or disadvantaged groups and individuals; that is, it can stimulate social change. In analyzing the role and function of the media, this book advocates neither a radical left nor a radical right perspective. But it does assume there is much more that mass media could do to eliminate injustice and inequity in the world. Social control and social change can result in both good and evil, and that determination often depends on who benefits and who does not from media coverage. This book was written to appeal to undergraduate and entry-level graduate students in the United States. The focus is interpretive it seeks to explain the why rather than the what.

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