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Sammelrezension: Die Macht der Presse

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Die Macht der Presse (Sammelrezension)

James Curran, Jean Seaton (Ed.): Power without Responsibility – The Press and Broadcasting in Britain

London: Routledge 1997, 420 p., ISBN 0-415-11407-1, £12.99

Richard Keeble: Secret State, Silent Press – New Militarism, the Gulf and the Modern Image of Warfare

Luton: University of Luton Press 1997 (John Libbey Media), 222 S.,

ISBN 0-86020-539-9, Preis nicht mitgeteilt

When you read *Power Without Responsibility* by James Curran and Jean Seaton you feel yourself to be in the presence of a masterly work. It has the sombre weight of the well-established academic classic: it is in its 5th edition and the text on the back of the book tells us it is required reading for students and teachers alike. And it is true that it is a (mostly) very well-written book. It comprehensively charts the evolution of the power of the press from its inception as the first tool for the mass dissemination of news to the general public, the discovery of its potential to manipulate public opinion and taste, the realisation of that potential by ideologically opposed groups representing capital and the rapidly organising members of the workforce, through to the continuation of that ideological battle today in an increasingly technological free-market economy.

It is only when it is compared to a book such as *Secret State, Silent Press* – a book about the manipulation of information and public opinion during the Gulf War, written by Richard Keeble, a lecturer in ethics – that you realise how tame and understated *Power Without Responsibility* is. However, this may be due to the fact that these books have completely different agendas. *Power Without Responsibility* is a scholarly work, written in a relatively easy style (although the chapter on Globalization is heavy going more because of the nebulous quality of its subject matter than the complexity of the writing), exploring the symbiotic relationship between the political/capitalist elites, the press/broadcasters and the consumers of their product. Its brief is to chart the history of these 'industries', destroy the myths that have built up over the years about our press and broadcasting institutions e.g. that we have a 'free' press, we have a liberal press and the state doesn't interfere in the workings of our broadcasters, and then offer ways forward to democratise these institutions.

Secret State, Silent Press comes from a much more radical analytical tradition exemplified by *War and Peace News* by the Glasgow University Media Group or *Necessary Illusions* by Noam Chomsky, which doesn't discuss whether the media influences opinion but by how much it already does so, and how much of it is deliberate manipulation by the powers that be.

Both books see an open, representative press to be essential for a truly democratic society. *Power Without Responsibility* puts forward some suggestions which sound great in the general sense: strengthening monopoly controls, safeguard-

ing the independence of the BBC by automatically increasing the license fee but exempting low income households, giving The Press Complaints Commission some teeth to deal with intransigent papers, allowing journalists to take part in the selection of editors and contractually protecting those editors from their newspaper's proprietor's wrath. However, in the case of the latter proposals it is difficult to see how the media owners would voluntarily give up their power. *Secret State, Silent Press* passionately condemns the present system of media manipulation and infers it is going to get worse.

Both books are extensively researched. Curran's history of the press, the attempts of the state to control it, the influences of the proprietors and conglomerates which own it now and a dissection of the myths which underpin 'the fourth estate' is excellent. Seaton's study of the BBC, the consolidation of its paternalistic power during The Second World War and the effects of a free-market economics management style in the 1990's is also very good. They have made a very good attempt at contextualising the industry and sociology of broadcasting and viewing, the myths which surround them and the philosophy of public service broadcasting which informs not only the BBC but commercial television as well. However, I have the feeling they are both unsure of their footing when it comes to the technical background of the new digital/cable/satellite services soon to be on offer, and an overview of the possible impact this new technology will have on the industry and the viewing practices of the consumers is missing.

Implicit in all these discussions of the media is that there are many vested interests – political, capitalistic, military – who all feel the media plays an important role in communicating their self-serving messages. Richard Keeble makes a very strong case in *Secret State, Silent Media* that the political/military elites are well-aware of the efficacy of the media for manipulating public opinion to support 'new militarism', and the detrimental effect 'wrong' information made available to the public can have to their cause. The strategy in the Gulf War was to create a credible, evil enemy bent on regional domination, who needed to be dealt with. Then obscure the historical, economic and international reasons for his intransigence, play down any chances for a diplomatic solution and prevent journalists showing unappetising aspects of the war or giving background information which would conflict with the politicians' interpretation of events. This was done by limiting access to information, overt censorship, intimidating journalists who strayed from their military 'minders' and encouraging an atmosphere of self-censorship by allowing journalists and troops to inter-relate freely off the battle-field. As Cold War rhetoric was no longer relevant, President Bush in particular dusted off the pre-Cold War language of the last 'just' war to turn Saddam Hussein into a 'modern day Hitler', with the world's fourth biggest army at his disposal, although the West's role in arming him in the first place in order to neutralise the previous demon of the US, Iran, the fact that most of his army were young frightened conscripts who would often run away rather than fight, that current regional problems were caused by the

Great Powers' arbitrary carve-up of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and the fact that the British used mustard gas against the Kurds in the 1920's were all conveniently forgotten. Keeble's disbelief that the journalists and their editors could repeat so unquestioningly the jingoistic rhetoric that came from the likes of Gen. Colin Powell, John Major and George Bush, is palatable.

A common thread which runs through both books is that increasingly sophisticated/cheap/mobile technology, which should offer greater access to broadcasting and greater freedom to broadcasters, doesn't exactly do so. The new print technology broke the power of the unions but helped consolidate media ownership into the hands of the few, satellite technology should allow news teams to report live from inaccessible hot spots, but the military doesn't permit it, 24 hours per day news channels should give us more news but do we get better news?

Power without Responsibility and *Secret State, Silent Press* are both successes. The former for the solid, professional way in which it is written and the comprehensiveness of its information, and the latter for making you question the way we form our opinions by unthinkingly accepting information from a media which limits discussion as often as it opens it up.

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