The Academy of Political Science

475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274

(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · aps@psqonline.org · http://www.psqonline.org

POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

Volume 113 · Number 4 · Winter 1998-99

No part of this article may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except:

- one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or
- with prior written permission of The Academy of Political Science.

Political Science Quarterly is published by The Academy of Political Science. Contact the Academy for further permission regarding the use of this work.

Political Science Quarterly
Copyright © 1998 by The Academy of Political Science. All rights reserved.

Reimbursement Methodology, and Section 1115 Medicaid Waivers. Nevertheless, those patient and ambitious enough to attempt Hackey's book will find it illuminating.

RICHARD HIMELFARB
Hofstra University

Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution *by Timothy E. Cook. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998. 289 pp. Cloth, $48.00; paper, $17.95.*

Precisely the wrong actors—journalists and political leaders—dominate popular discourse regarding the role of media in American politics. The interplay between news making and policy making has grown in both complexity and importance throughout U.S. history. Full appreciation of this relationship requires a detached perspective and also the rare capacity to keep the big picture in sight without looking past crucial subtleties. Timothy E. Cook demonstrates these attributes in *Governing with the News*, an impressive treatise on American news media.

Cook's central claim concerns the political role of contemporary media. Media clearly matter for politics, and the choices journalists make influence how citizens view government and how elected officials perform their duties. But such a depiction, Cook argues, understates media's political role. After carefully tracing the evolution of policy toward media and precisely defining his key concepts, Cook posits that media are a political institution, not merely a collection of politically significant organizations. Instead, media together constitute an institution, and one that like political parties and the interest group system operates simultaneously inside and outside of government.

For a topic to receive news coverage it must be seen by journalists to be both important and interesting. Cook suggests that journalists cede the task of identifying what is important to public officials, whereas journalists themselves determine whether a potential story is sufficiently interesting. Government has more than a hand in shaping what makes the news, but journalists are not the helpless pawns of public officials.

To the contrary, Cook argues that how journalists do their job affects how public officials do theirs. Because journalists determine whether an issue or event is interesting enough to warrant coverage, political actors are encouraged to cast issues in manners consistent with journalistic norms. Press relations today rarely can be separated from policy making; consequently, journalistic norms affect which issues reach the policy agenda. Thus, Cook claims, media have become part of government: they are one of the separated institutions sharing power.

Governing with the News is not a book of bold-but-shallow claims. Cook's arguments are provocative. But he develops them slowly and cautiously, drawing on a staggering wealth of examples and references. Cook's citations are so thorough that I played a game at the end of each chapter in which I awarded myself a point for each relevant work I could identify that Cook had neglected to discuss. There is much more scoring in a typical World Cup soccer match.

Naturally, it is possible to counterargue some of Cook's claims, but this does not undercut the book's central message. For instance, I found Cook's discussion of the Supreme Court's press relations to be unsatisfying in the sense that his arguments seemed to defy falsifiability;

everything the Court does or could do is interpreted as evidence of image-conscious actors. But while I might insist that David Souter hardly rivals Bill Clinton or Newt Gingrich in media savvy, I am persuaded by Cook's core argument that the media share power with the Supreme Court, just as they do with other political institutions.

A songwriter friend once rightly took it as a compliment when I remarked that his newest piece was too short. I have the same complaint here. Cook develops his model of media so skillfully that this reader was anxious for more. But perhaps the next step should be taken by others. *Governing with the News* deserves to be influential, and readers should respond to it with innovative research and policy.

JEFFERY J. MONDAK
Florida State University

Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized Political Initiative during the Iran-Contra Debate *by David Thelen. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996. 272 pp. Cloth, $55.00; paper, $14.95.*

This fascinating, provocative, repetitive, and frustrating book argues that we live in an age of opinion management in which the media, with their emphasis on entertainment, their reliance on the views and standards of governing elites and the partisan punditry of Washington insiders, define and limit public debate of issues. They also construct the public as a faceless and abstract mass in part because polls, the media's main way of presenting the views of ordinary citizens, fail to convey people's "questioning, protesting, defending, quarreling, and asserting voices" (p. 9). As for politicians-policy makers, they engage in mass marketing appeals and sound bites instead of listening and responding to Americans' needs, experiences, and preferences.

Occasionally, however, dramatic events, usually shown on television, inspire people to expand the public forum by raising and discussing issues they consider significant, thereby becoming active citizens. The summer of 1987 was one such occasion. In their reactions to the televised Iran-contra hearings, people spoke for themselves, thereby transcending opinion management and rejecting the media's frames (Olliemania) and interpretations. These reactions were displayed in communications to members of Congress in which people raised and discussed such fundamental issues as heroism, foreign policy (should the United States police the world?), and democratic government.

David Thelen read and bases much of his book on several thousand of these letters, mainly ones to Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton, the Democratic co-chair of the hearings. He shows how the writers covered a spectacular range of topics and perspectives and, contrary to news stories about the effects of the hearings, did not focus on Oliver North.

The author's key argument is that the letter writers' interpretations of media contents, the principles and convictions they asserted, and the solutions they offered stemmed from their intimate relationships with other people, mainly their families. In these primary relationships "thinking and acting are inseparable from personal responsibility and everyday needs" (p. 10).

This book is eminently susceptible to criticism. Content analysis of the hearings themselves, their coverage and related stories in the media, and of the possibly unrepresentative letters is impressionistic. The author seems to ennoble the public, over-estimating most peo-