Media, Markets, and Democracy


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Formal media theories tend to be rooted in the effects and audience literature (such as desensitization), and in the content literature (dramatism, for example). Theories of media production and industrialization are less numerous and less prominent. As someone who primarily considers himself to be a political economist, I believe that this de-emphasis on formal theories often places political economy research at a disadvantage in terms of journal and conference submissions. “Where’s the theory?” a reviewer may ask, especially a non-political economist. One response to such criticism is that solid political economy contains a set of assumptions that emerge in its empirical discussions, rather than in subsections like “The Theory of Advertising Control of Media” or “Corporate Synergistic Manipulation Theory,” which, of course, sound pedantic. (Admittedly, this “paradigm attribution” may be whiny self delusion; perhaps my own research is just plain vacuous.) Besides, where is the theory section in such influential texts as Ben Bagdikian’s (1983) Media Monopoly or Herbert Schiller’s (1989) Culture Inc.? Are these less valuable without sections that make obvious assumptions more obvious?

Just because the big gun works often do not engage in blatant theorizing or that theoretical assumptions are embedded in empirical analyses does not totally let political economy off the hook. Much of this area’s work (including mine) could be improved with a bit more discussion and understanding of how the principles of economics show that modern media incentives frequently work to undermine democratic content or, more fundamentally, what democratic content and democracies should look like. C. Edwin Baker, in Media, Markets, and Democracy, makes explicit the theoretical assumptions that critical economic scholars often take for granted and uses these assumptions to develop policy initiatives. He argues early in the book that

One problem is that many on the left have neither, for whatever reason, thought carefully enough about the nature of the problem with existing media nor related a program of reform to any carefully formulated normative ideals, such as an affirmative theory of democracy. (p. xii).

By doing exactly this, the book provides a valuable service through its nitty-gritty discussions of the relationships between economics, democracy, and policy.

Baker’s book updates and expands several of his extensive articles that were published earlier in law journals. This signals that he is viewing media from a critical-legal point of view, but also with a focused eye toward economic and democratic theory. There are three main sections to the book. In the first section, he applies conventional economic theory to media behavior to dispute the idea that market-driven media simply “gives people what they want.” He applies economic analysis to take it to the free-market advocates: How can such
advocates say that media give people what they want when conventional theory (rather than Marxist-influenced economic ideas) shows strong disconnections between people’s preferences and media behavior? In this first part, Baker discusses such issues as the “public good” aspect of media (the idea that, unlike products like ice cream cones, many people can consume the same broadcast of a TV show without production costs increasing), the convoluted nature of negative and positive externalities (how media affect third parties not involved in the economic transaction), and the complicated issue of measuring “what people want.” He also persuasively argues that advertising-driven media do not so much give people what they want, but rather give advertisers whom they want. As with the entirety of this book, much of this first section suggests corrective policies for destructive trends in media, which is useful to address another pesky question asked of political economists, “So what should we do about all this antidemocratic corporate media?” It is in this first section that this book is most reminiscent of Baker’s (1994) very useful earlier work, *Advertising and a Democratic Press*.

The second part focuses on different theories of democracy, the type of media these theories would develop (and avoid), and policy initiatives that each theory implies. He examines four types of democracy (elitist, liberal pluralism, republican, and complex), arguing that the latter combines many of the best elements of the other three, including a balance of developing and empowering co-cultural groups in a society with a cultivation of common cultural threads and concerns.

The third major section focuses on globalization, specifically the import and export of media products internationally. Baker feels this is an arena that exacerbates many of the concerns of the first two sections. As a former attorney for the ACLU, Baker argues strongly against a strict protectionist policy that completely bans media imports, but does advocate for a democratically determined cultural right to impose tariffs and percentage quotas on such imports. In the conclusion, Baker argues that journalists need to be more activist about their own economic lives by encouraging policies that are inclusive and nurturing of alternative perspectives while avoiding the suppression of ideas and the watchdog function of media. Finally, in a meaty 23-page postscript, Baker applies his perspective to the Internet and digital media, warning against predictions of the emancipatory potential of new media that are too optimistic.

Baker’s intertwining of economic principles and democratic theory as applied to U.S., global, and new media contexts is ambitious, but may strike some as occasionally repetitious. However, I found the many internal summaries and references to earlier points very valuable as Baker brought coherence to the complex relationships of these big-ticket items. An important book, *Media, Markets and Democracy* offers needed groundwork for critical media theory.

**References**

