

Louw, E. (2005). *The media and political process*. London, England: Sage.

Reviewed by: [Sean Phelan](#)

Eric Louws *The Media and Political Process* is a very worthwhile read. It fashions a descriptively rich account of the relationship between media and political process that is devoid of sentimental identification with any of the principal institutional actors that centre the liberal democratic system. The analysis knowingly evokes the pessimism of the Frankfurt School and Louw has little time for perspectives that over-exalt the possibilities of audience agency or relish the democratising potential of infotainment. Resistance to the 'culture industry beast' is certainly not precluded. But this is, in the main, a universe where the 'symbiotic, though non-conspiratorial, relationship between political actors, PR practitioners, journalists and pollsters constructs a hype-driven politics that keeps the masses in a default state of political apathy and distraction.

The book has been structured and designed with textbook intent. It is specifically billed as an undergraduate political communication text, though it could also be a useful teaching resource on some postgraduate papers. Each chapter opens with a boxed summary that usefully anchors its key themes in the wider context of the book. Each chapter ends by recapping on the main concepts, supplemented by a list of useful questions 'for further consideration that could be easily adapted to a tutorial setting. These supplementary questions are something of a curiosity, as they often broach normative concerns that Louws analysis largely evades.

The structure of the book is in three parts. Part 1 offers a historically grounded introduction to political processes and the mass media and signals the book's specific concern with interrogating liberal democratic norms. The persistent attention to historical perspectives is one of the book's real strengths; as exemplified by the framing of a discussion of 'political celebrity with reference to Gandhi. Part 1 also introduces a key analytical distinction between politics as 'image and politics as 'substance, and Louw is generally sensitive to the dialectical relationship between both dimensions. Part 2 examines the relationship between identity, particularly national identity, politics and the media. Part 3, by far the longest section of the book, explicates a central theme about the 'media-ization of politics through chapter-length explorations of issues such as spindoctoring, political celebrity, the selling of political ideas, war reporting, terrorism and foreign relations.

Louw characterises his analytical approach in the book's introduction as critical 'constructivist and distinguishes it from the 'empiricist approach, which underpins the historically dominant paradigm in political communication. This preliminary discussion is suitably pitched to the concerns of the imagined reader, though Louw could have made better illustrative use of the distinction in some of the subsequent chapters. For example, while he clearly dissects the limits of the 'CNN effects thesis as a framework for understanding the role of media in the formulation of foreign policy, the ontological and epistemological issues at stake here could have been better explicated (though, to be fair, he does observe the 'flawed nature of 'the question upon which the CNN effects thesis was built). Similarly, pluralist and public choice theories of politics are discussed without any explicit recognition of their alignment with an empiricist worldview.

The commitment to a constructivist approach is belied in other respects. The importance of language to the process of political identification is, unsurprisingly, affirmed throughout the book. Yet the affirmation is largely commonsensical and Louw has very little to say about the formal role of language and representation in a constructivist epistemology. This omission, in itself, is hardly a great oversight: there are many political communication texts that are a lot less reflexive about their epistemological pedigree than this one. But, to this reader at least, the book's neglect of these issues is obvious when signifying associations that are the constructed product of a hegemonic politics are discussed in ways that make them sound natural or inevitable. For example, Louw characterises 'feminism and 'multiculturalism as 'discourses [that] were developed and popularized [by a top-down cadre of traditional intellectuals] to widen the labour pool and give legitimacy to a capitalist project. There is some truth to this of course. But Louw undermines his own constructivist logic when he characterises these interdiscursive relationships as if they were set in stone, thereby glossing over the possibility of 'multiculturalism, 'feminism and even 'capitalism being differently articulated.

The book is unlikely to endear itself to public relations scholars. The practitioners of political public relations are characterised as little more than 'demagogic facilitators of a 'smoke-and-mirrors game, who will work 'for whoever pays the most. However, unlike the scapegoat figure of the staple journalistic critique, Louw recognises that the 'dark arts stereotype is only half the story and that journalists are often equally complicit 'hype-merchants. That said, the book would have benefited from some modest engagement with the proliferation of emerging theoretical perspectives on public relations, not least in its discussion of the dialectical relationship between the 'image and 'substance of politics.

A book with this kind of expanse will naturally disappoint some readers for not giving due recognition to their own pet theorists. This reader was particularly surprised to see no referencing of the work of Michael Billig in the discussion of the media's role in the construction of national identity, and no nod to the emerging Bourdieu-

inspired work on the specificity of the ?journalistic field. But to indict the book on such grounds would be very unfair, as Louw references a number of theoretical perspectives (he makes particularly good use of Erving Goffmans work) that are likely to stimulate the curiosity of the keen undergraduate reader. A more solid general criticism would be that the force of the authors vision can sometimes undermine the subtly of the analysis. Yet, these carps aside, this is a book that is packed with excellent examples that should easily resonate with its targeted readership. For an ambitious and accessible overview of the relationship between media and politics in the contemporary world, Louws book comes strongly recommended.

**Purchase information:** This book is available from all good booksellers, or can be purchased direct from Sage at: <http://www.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book225491>

**About the reviewer:** Dr Sean Phelan is a lecturer at the Wellington campus of the Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University. He has published research on the media representation of the 9/11 attacks and the 2003 Iraq War, and is currently examining the journalistic representation of the 2003/2004 foreshore and seabed conflict. His has also recently been working on a number of articles, some of which are forthcoming, that reengage with his doctoral work on the influence of neoliberal assumptions on Irish political and media discourse. His principal research interests are discourse analysis, political communication and neoliberalism, and he has a particular interest in the work of Bourdieu, Laclau and Mouffe, and Fairclough. He was awarded his PhD from Dublin City University in 2003.