

PAUL STARR'S *The Creation of the Media*, a path-breaking book on the scale of his earlier *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, offers a powerful response to a uniquely American "problem". That problem is the mythology that has come to surround the First Amendment to the US Constitution which specifies that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press". Many Americans, not least of all journalists, seem to believe that other than by keeping its hands off, government has had nothing to do with the considerable success of the US press. *The Creation of the Media* provides substantial evidence against this first prejudice (that the state has done nothing positive), while staunchly and less convincingly defending the second (that the US is the best).

Starr is not the first scholar to insist on the political shaping of the media, as his ample footnotes attest. Isolated from one another, these specific case studies might be dismissed as just occasional lapses from a *laissez-faire* tendency. Simply through its encyclopedic breadth, *The Creation of the Media* makes it irrefutably clear that political intervention was the rule, not the exception – even in America! This, of course, is a hopeful finding, because it reminds us that media are the products of human agency, not the inevitable result of economic or technological forces.

Embedded within Starr's layered historical narrative is a theoretically-sophisticated causal model of media development – what one might term historically-contingent political culture. Challenging the technological determinists, Starr shows that technological development was almost always anticipated and guided by political "constitutive" choices. These choices, Starr suggests, concern three areas: legal and normative rules (access to information, privacy, intellectual property, free expression), specific design of media networks and industries, and broad institutions "related to the creation of intangible and human capital – that is, education, research, and innovation" (p. 5).

Against economic arguments that politics serve merely as a vehicle for the implementation of underlying commercial interests, *The Creation of the Media* demonstrates that democratic ideals and values also guided policy choices. By stressing historical contingency and political struggle, however, Starr also distinguishes his approach from more static "policy paradigms" used by Frank Dobbin and other new institutionalists to explain enduring cross-national differences in industrial policies. For Starr, no outcome is ever inevitable, and "no single idea, interest, or condition explains the distinctive path taken by communications in America" (see pp. 14, 436). Starr is at his best when he describes the complex interplay of contingent historical factors

\* About Paul STARR. *The Creation of the Media: political origins of modern communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004)

that explain why media technologies developed one way rather than another. For instance, the privatization of the telegraph, which set the pattern for the telephone, radio, and television industries, was far from pre-ordained. During the early 1840s, the editor of the *New York Herald* expressed the common view, also held by inventor Samuel Morse, that the "government must be impelled to take hold" of the telegraph as part of the Post Office (pp 163-164). Yet the US government never did take hold, and the explanation lies not in some timeless policy paradigm, but in the contingent confluence of multiple factors – political (increasing North-South conflict, and the 1844 election of a Democratic president opposed to a policy perceived to aid the industrialized North), economic (depression, the financial default of several government-funded railroad and canal projects, and thus a greater skepticism toward "internal development"), and business strategy (an overly timid initial development that failed to generate impressive returns).

In sum, relative to Europe, America's "distinctive path in communications" has consisted of three elements: first, earlier and more rapid development of media systems; second, broader geographical extension (into rural areas, as well as cities) and popular accessibility (not oriented only toward elites); and third, a higher level of technological innovation (p. 227). The dependent variable in Starr's analysis, however, is not always clear. As an "engine of wealth and power creation", he insists, the "American framework of communications" has no equal (p. 3). Indeed, there would be little argument that the most powerful global "Media are American", to borrow Jeremy Tunstall's memorable phrase. More problematically, though, Starr also wants to argue for American superiority in the democratic qualities of its mediated public sphere.

Starr's American triumphalism holds up best through the first half of the 19th century. Ironically, the First Amendment was the least of the American press's early supports; with only minor exceptions, the Supreme Court "did not uphold a single claim based on the First Amendment until after World War I" (p. 81). The American advantage lay more in geography and overall political structure. Even if the government had wanted to censor political dissent, the sheer size of the new nation, further fragmented by a federal system of governance, made it nearly impossible. Perceiving their young republic as having a greater need for information flow than social control, American political leaders did far more than their European counterparts to pro-actively promote communication. For example, "while the Europeans taxed publications, the United States subsidized the growth of independent newspapers through cheap postal rates" (p. 16). By 1850, through its education, tax, intellectual property, and postal policies, the American government helped assure a higher rate of literacy (with the exception of Sweden), more affordable access to a wider range of books and newspapers, greater protections of citizen privacy, and greater transparency in governmental policy-making and administration than existed anywhere in Europe (p. 105).

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Starr's tale of American superiority begins to break down in the late 19th century. Although political censorship laws were decidedly more strict in France (and to a lesser extent England) through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the 1880s into the 1930s, it was the United States which led the way in sweeping censorship of morals and manners. Starr also shows that America's early unregulated private telegraph (Western Union) and news service (Associated Press) monopolies offered few if any democratic advantages over their nationalized counterparts in Europe. In Britain, a single nationalized postal and telegraph system facilitated the rise of multiple, ideologically competing news services (p. 179); in contrast, the Associated Press and Western Union often abused their monopoly power to monitor private telegraphic communications, and selectively present or suppress news, in one case to assure election of the Republican presidential candidate over his Democratic rival (pp. 186-187). Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one would be hard pressed to argue that political dissent, especially from the left, has been better protected, let alone promoted, in the US than in Western Europe. And in the current era of corporate media consolidation, American press law, with its focus on governmental abuses, has often been tragically ill-equipped to counter overarching business power.

Starr captures well the complexity of communications policy, and how positive outcomes are as often as not the unintended results of political choices. However, one consistent prescriptive lesson he draws – the virtue of decentralization over centralization – is debatable. Certainly, decentralization may be one factor that allows a media sector to resist government efforts to control it, as when the centralized US movie industry became a much easier target of censorship than the more dispersed book, magazine, and newspaper publishing houses. But the link between decentralization and other democratic media virtues are not so clear cut. A fragmented media system is also one in which voices are dispersed rather than joined in debate, and lacking debate, these voices may become homogeneous echoes of one another rather than distinct ideological alternatives – as is the case with the almost interchangeable monopoly newspapers, chain-owned or not, that now dominate most American metropolitan regions. If centralization increases the threat of government control, it also seems to intensify democratic political life. Even today, there is probably more genuine intellectual diversity and lively debate in the concentrated media and intellectual milieus of Paris or London than across the wide stretch of the American continent.

*The Creation of the Media* leaves off exactly at the historical moment – the post-World War II era – when America's democratic advantage becomes least obvious. Since the 1950s, European public service broadcasters and politically-engaged national newspapers have often contributed to broader citizen participation and more reasoned, critical public discourse than one finds in the United States. In recent years, C Edwin Baker and other US legal scholars have called attention to the negative "externalities" produced by America's hyper-commercialized media system, and have

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called for targeted government intervention to promote speech that is being silenced by market mechanisms. In failing to cite this literature, in his frequent praises of the virtues of advertising funding, and in his dismissal of the Frankfurt School's critique of consumer culture, Starr implies a normative preference against non-commercial alternatives, when in fact, these are also part of America's historical legacy and are perhaps needed now more than ever.

While Starr the historian reminds us that things might have turned out differently for America, Starr the comparativist seems just as content that they did not. *The Creation of the Media* sometimes reads like the account of a tourist who goes abroad only to confirm her existing prejudices about the advantages of home. Nevertheless, Starr has presented a provocative thesis about American-European differences that calls for further testing. This future research should build on Starr's strong finding of cross-national media policy differences to increase our understanding of their complex links to media content and form, as well as the contours of democratic political life.

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