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Book Review: Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age by Matthew A. Baum

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BOOK REVIEWS

Matthew A. Baum, *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age* (Princeton University Press, 2003). 344pp.

Matthew Baum has written an insightful work that is an important addition to the political communications literature. Baum's inquiry is an attempt to address a counter-intuitive relationship found in public opinion trends over the second half of the twentieth century. He finds that while public interest in politics has not changed appreciably since the Vietnam war era, the percentage of the public that indicated that they were following foreign policy crises like the Persian Gulf War has grown. In *Soft News Goes to War*, Baum suggests that soft news programming – shows which use real world dramas as a means to entertain their audiences – is the key variable that explains this pattern. He contends that soft news is a growing phenomenon, that it covers foreign policy issues differently than traditional news outlets, and that this difference has a demonstrable impact on public opinion in America.

The key premise for this thesis is the evolving nature of the media industry in the United States over the past two decades. With the advent of cable television, the media industry has grown from a handful of channels to a vast array of hundreds of channels. Confronted with such an exponential increase in options, individual viewers now seek media sources that are less generic and more suited to their unique tastes. In turn, this has created increased competition in the media market-place to capture and hold a loyal audience, and broadcasters discovered

that the real-life dramas found in the news could be a cost-effective form of entertainment for some viewers. Baum provides an illuminating comparison between the profit margins of the soft news television show *Dateline* and the fictional drama *ER* to demonstrate this concept. While the advertising revenues are lower for *Dateline*, so too are the costs – and so, the bottom line is better in soft news. As a result, soft news programs have flourished by covering high profile real-world events, such as the Gulf War.

According to Baum, the soft news media informs its viewers about high-profile foreign policy crises as a by-product of the entertainment its viewers are seeking. Baum applies an expected utility model to demonstrate this phenomenon. He contends that the increase in public attentiveness is not related to any expectation of increased benefit, but rather a reduction in the cognitive costs. Because foreign policy crises have many of the key elements of a “good story” – drama, suspense, the possibility of conflict, etc. – soft news outlets entertain their viewers with the news. In this sense, political information reaches the viewers by “piggybacking” on the entertainment (p. 25).

The significance of this exposure lies in who watches soft news programming and how it could potentially influence them. Baum effectively demonstrates that a significant proportion of soft news viewers are generally uninterested in international events and often do not have any other source of political information. They are seeking entertainment, not information. Yet, they get both. And it matters how these news events are covered. Baum contends that soft news outlets frame these stories in ways that are more compelling to their particular viewing audience. He notes that they stress stories that emphasize human interest, tragedy, and violence, but often lack any broader historical context.

But how that information is presented does matter. As Baum notes, "the nature of the political information that people consume can influence the substance of their opinions" (p. 4). He suggests that given the way in which soft news outlets cover foreign policy crises, it tends to promote a more isolationist viewpoint among its viewers. Hence, soft news coverage not only has the potential to increase the proportion of the public that is attentive to foreign policy crises, but may also influence how the public perceives the event. It is unfortunate that the time period of Baum's study pre-dates the War on Terrorism and the Iraq War. These cases would provide an interesting test of Baum's conclusion.

In a larger sense, Baum's work is exploring the nexus of information and entertainment in the modern media from an understudied perspective – what you might call the "backside of infotainment". Infotainment is a term which has typically been used to describe how news organizations consider the entertainment or sensational value to the viewer when selecting and presenting information. Baum's study demonstrates the reverse – how media outlets are utilizing the news for entertainment value. The line between information and entertainment is becoming increasingly blurred.

As with any study, there are weaknesses. First, as the author notes, there are limitations to how far one can credit soft news with this change in voter attentiveness owing to limitations in the available data. The author does an admirable job mitigating this problem, relying upon multiple individual and aggregate level tests, as well as multiple methodological approaches, but the basic weakness remains. This is particularly true with the public opinion comparisons involving the Vietnam era. As is often the case in social science research, many of the more interesting

questions are difficult to address owing to limitations in the data or methodology.

Also, the conceptual definition of soft news could use more precision. The author includes traditional exposes like *Inside Edition* and *Sixty Minutes* with more humorous soft news outlets like *the Daily Show* and *the Tonight Show*. I would expect them to convey their information differently based on their framing – human interest and tragedy for the former, satire and humor for the latter. That said, this is perhaps more a suggestion for future research than a critique of this work.

Baum's study is an important work for both academics and practitioners of public policy. The rise of soft news is recent and its implications are just recently available for research. Also, as candidates for political office continue to appear on these outlets to humanize their image with the voters (e.g., Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on the *Arsenio Hall Show*), this venue is having a real impact on modern politics. Hence, this book elucidates an important, yet under-studied, trend in the modern media and how it can influence public opinion.

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Beth A. Rosenson, *The Shadowlands of Conduct: Ethics and State Politics* (Georgetown University Press, 2004). 256 pp.

Beth A. Rosenson has provided a clearly written analysis of the factors that influence whether or not state legislatures will enact ethics laws, how restrictive these laws will be, and the extent to which enforcement mechanisms are put into place.