From Cronkite to Colbert: the evolution of broadcast news

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Caught between a loss of market share and a bad economy, today's TV news is in flux and under threat. In *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*, media studies professor Geoffrey Baym recounts the history of televised journalism and suggests that our best hope for its future is embodied in two Comedy Central entertainment programs: *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Despite his subtitle, Baym portrays the last half century of TV journalism as less evolution than devolution, a process through which institutions that once served to "ensure political accountability" have become little more than purveyors of "emotional theater" and "subjective engagement" (p. 58). He blames this state of affairs squarely on capitalism and corporate greed--forces that generate ever increasing institutional hunger for ratings and advertising revenue. In the work of comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, Baym sees a return to the audience service implicitly provided by journalistic traditions of the past. Like Conkrite and William Paley before them, Stewart and Colbert's work shines the harsh light of scrutiny on both politicians and their partners in crime—conventional journalists who have abandoned serious political coverage. According to Baym, today's journalists must embrace practices used to such effect by Stewart and Colbert, in order to "reinvent the Fourth Estate and reinvigorate the conversation of democracy" (p. 176).

The bulk of *From Cronkite to Colbert* traces changes in broadcast news across three distinct "eras" that delineate separate approaches to televised journalism: (1) a high modern "network age," epitomized by the exemplary network coverage of Watergate; (2) a post-modern "multichannel era," featuring the superficial reporting seen during the Clinton sex scandal and

impeachment; and (3) today's neo-modern "post-network age," in which the best political journalism comes from comedians. Unfortunately, while Baym's examination of the differences between eras is insightful, his analysis of why such differences occurred is disappointing. His review of existing scholarship suggests that many changes stem from the constant efforts of larger and larger media companies to boost their bottom lines. Yet, Baym never really explains his singular focus on corporate greed, nor does he fully explore the impact of other social and cultural trends. For example, he notes a post-Nixon growth in public cynicism but provides no substantive analysis of how this may have affected the practice of journalism. Certainly the growth of corporations into a virtual media oligopoly profoundly affects how news is gathered and delivered, but in the absence of a deeper analysis than Baym supplies, this seems a convenient and superficial scapegoat for specific problems.

Baym's final chapter, discussing Stewart and Colbert, suffers from similar weaknesses. Baym paints the entertainers as saviors of modern journalism whose comedy serves as a lens for detailed examination of politicians and political processes rather than simply mirroring the horse-race aspects of modern elections and the trivial details of Washington events--common focuses for modern journalism. Sadly, so long as the future of television news is limited to a single entertainment channel, that future can be neither certain nor secure. Although Baym urges conventional journalists and networks to adopt practices that work for Stewart and Colbert, he provides no practical suggestions on how to do so. His review of three Viacom experiments, *The Early Show* at CBS, BET's *Nightly News,* and various efforts at MTV News, suggests that the precursors to Comedy Central's "fake news" shows could not succeed and thereby calls into question prospects for Baym's anticipated future.

None of these flaws are fatal, and *From Cronkite to Colbert* should prove valuable for those new to critical examination of broadcast news. The title will work well as part of a larger reading list for graduate and undergraduate courses and may also interest some members of the general public. However, scholars and others familiar with news, news processes, and trends in journalism will likely wish that Baym had included deeper and more extensive analyses of why the news has changed and how it can be improved.

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