

States) more sophisticated in the former than in the latter.

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Processing Politics: Learning From Television in the Internet Age

By Doris Graber. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 232 pp. \$40.00 (hard), \$16.00 (soft)

A review by Jeffrey P. Jones
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The latest contribution from one of political communication's most preeminent scholars purports to be a continuation and extension of her previous work (1988) on political learning and cognition in regard to how citizens use television in understanding politics. With this defense of television as a meaningful site for political information, Graber joins a growing chorus of scholars who are interested in developing a multifaceted and complex understanding of the ways in which citizens engage politics via media texts, and how that engagement shapes our civic culture (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000; Dahlgren, 2000; Gripsrud, 1999; Miller, 1998; Street, 1997; Thelen, 1996). Many communication scholars may feel they have moved beyond the critics of television, and hence this book may not go far enough. Many political scientists, though, may feel this is where their discipline is in regard to television and politics and may find it quite useful.

The title of the book charts an ambitious direction, but, unlike *Processing the News* (1988), is somewhat misleading in that relatively little of the book extends our understanding of how citizens actually "process" politics, what it is they "learn," or even why the "internet age" is a meaningful designation for this book. Graber actually sets out to solve three puzzles: (a) why ordinary Americans prefer getting their political news from television when many of them also hold a negative attitude toward television in general; (b) why television-reliant citizens believe they are informed about politics when political scientists say they are woefully ignorant in civic matters; and (c) how television can be both a great 20th-century invention and a spoiler of democracy at the same time. She is frustrated with scholarly voices that blame television for current democratic woes, including citizen "ignorance" of political affairs. As such, she offers a rebuttal to their arguments by defending the televisual medium as a tool for citizen learning and knowledge of politics.

Graber says the critics have got it all wrong, not only because citizens are satisfied with political information they receive on television, but also because the medium provides the type of information citizens' brains handle best. The reason, she argues, is that people have a "natural" predisposition toward audiovisuals because of the brain's information-processing capabilities. The more vivid, complex, and numerous stimuli available in audiovisuals are far superior to print-based information in affecting political learning. Furthermore, audiovisuals make it "easy, quick, and pleasant to gather and store information." There is a fundamental conflict here, though, between Graber's desire

for *behavioral* explanations and her reliance on cultural arguments to support her points. For instance, she argues that social scientists who measure citizens' civic IQ use "physiological unrealistic standards" in their evaluations because they test for information that citizens aren't interested in or information citizens don't need in the conduct of their civic duties. Though Graber might be correct in her latter contentions, the connection between citizens' limited physiological capabilities and these cultural factors is never made clear.

Another noticeable limitation in the book is that political "learning" is never defined or adequately explored. Graber reintroduces schema theory to explain the ways in which people develop mental maps for organizing knowledge about situations or individuals. More often than not, though, "learning" from television gets equated with memory and information retrieval issues (as opposed to the epistemological and phenomenological issues raised by critics of the medium). Perhaps that is fine when dealing solely with information, but Graber doesn't explore the productive potential of such concepts for understanding what type of learning or mental map making occurs in the internet age (or perhaps more accurately, in the "postnetwork era"). For instance, what happens when citizens watch *The West Wing* on NBC, *Wag the Dog* on HBO, or *That's My Bush!* on Comedy Central? Is the mental map cynical, or hopeful, or both? How do such schemata developed through fictional (or humorous) programming relate to (serious) news broadcasts about Bill Clinton and George W. Bush? In short, Graber has brought to the surface important issues about what occurs in the brain when processing political texts, but never follows

through in exploring these issues with fresh insights.

The politics on television investigated here is news. Graber concedes problems with the content of televisual news, but argues that practitioners are not using the medium to its full effect by addressing the ways our brains process information. In the last three chapters, Graber evaluates the major criticisms that have been levied on audiovisual news presentations and offers her own scorecard based on her revisionist reading of what the medium and its audiences are truly capable of. She also offers a list of what televisual news does well before turning to the things that can be done to make news formats more user friendly. Graber calls for reform without adequately dealing with the political economy of corporate practices, so her recommendations become another claim for what democracy "needs" from media. As a piece for questioning the thinking behind pervasive criticisms of television's role in democratic malaise, this book offers an interesting rebuttal, but for offering new data or theoretical insights into the active engagement of television audiences with politics *through* the medium, this book falls short of its promise.

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The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality

By Regina G. Lawrence. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. 279 pp. \$17.95 (soft).

A review by Erica Scharrer
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The news media have the power to insert stark and long-lasting images into our collective memories: the image of a student attempting to escape Columbine High School via an upper floor window during an assault by classmates; the videogame screen image of missiles dropping on Iraqi soil; or, one of the most gut-wrenching scenes of the decade, the image of Rodney King, a Black motorist, repeatedly beaten by White Los Angeles Police Department officers, captured by chance on amateur videotape.

It is this latter image, as well as its surrounding social context, that is at the heart of an expertly written and ingeniously theorized book by Regina G. Lawrence. *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality*, is an excellent analysis of the newspaper coverage devoted to the Rodney King beating, as well as to other incidents of police use of force and the fac-

tors that shape that coverage. Lawrence places the stunningly socially significant topic of police brutality within existing theoretical frameworks regarding the social construction of news and also determines important ways in which its application begs revision of current views of news gathering and its social and cultural repercussions.

In the first chapter, Lawrence suggests that decisions regarding what to emphasize in the news will influence how public problems are perceived and that, in turn, will impact policy initiatives to address those problems. Police use of force incidents can be what Lawrence calls "accidental events," dramatic and unplanned that allow journalists the opportunity to extend beyond typical routines and standard sources to pursue the perspectives of those whose voices are not often heard in mainstream news. The method Lawrence uses, a content analysis of multiple newspapers but especially the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* from 1985 to 1994 as well as interviews with reporters and police experts, is appropriate, comprehensive, and well justified.

In the second chapter, Lawrence argues convincingly that the line between use of force as a "necessary and legitimate tool" and brutality as "deliberately cruel," "often concealed," with "malicious intent" or at the very least "poor judgment" (p. 19) is often blurry. The slippery definition, lack of sufficient records to document the phenomenon, and political repercussions for those involved all work toward obscuring critical news coverage. Thus, many use-of-force incidents remain "institutionally driven" news stories, successfully controlled in tone and prominence by public officials who serve as routine sources on journalists' beats.