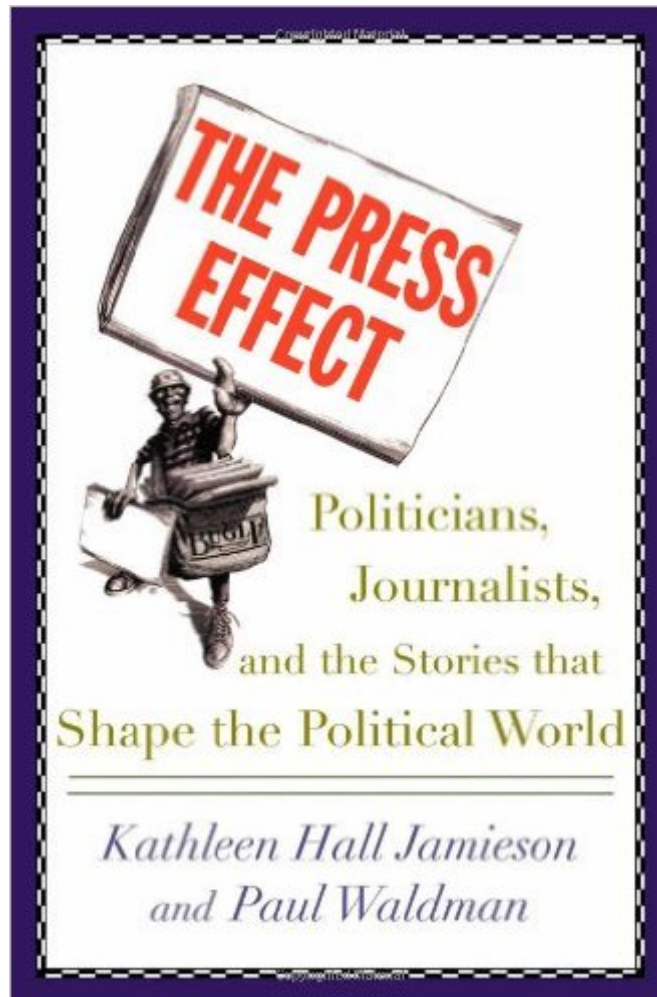


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The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, And The Stories That Shape The Political World



Synopsis

Was the 2000 presidential campaign merely a contest between Pinocchio and Dumbo? And did Dumbo miraculously turn into Abraham Lincoln after the events of September 11? In fact, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman argue in *The Press Effect*, these stereotypes, while containing some elements of the truth, represent the failure of the press and the citizenry to engage the most important part of our political process in a critical fashion. Jamieson and Waldman analyze both press coverage and public opinion, using the Annenberg 2000 survey, which interviewed more than 100,000 people, to examine one of the most interesting periods of modern presidential history, from the summer of 2000 through the aftermath of September 11th. How does the press fail us during presidential elections? Jamieson and Waldman show that when political campaigns side-step or refuse to engage the facts of the opposing side, the press often fails to step into the void with the information citizens require to make sense of the political give-and-take. They look at the stories through which we understand political events--examining a number of fabrications that deceived the public about consequential governmental activities--and explore the ways in which political leaders and reporters select the language through which we talk and think about politics, and the relationship between the rhetoric of campaigns and the reality of governance. They explore the role of the campaigns and the press in casting the 2000 general election as a contest between Pinocchio and Dumbo, and ask whether in 2000 the press applied the same standards of truth-telling to both Bush and Gore. The unprecedented events of election night and the thirty-six days that followed revealed the role that preconceptions play in press interpretation and the importance of press frames in determining the tone of political coverage as well as the impact of network overconfidence in polls. *The Press Effect* is, ultimately, a wide-ranging critique of the press's role in mediating between politicians and the citizens they are supposed to serve.

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Customer Reviews

Jamieson and Waldman offer a highly critical overview of media coverage, focusing on the 2000 Presidential election, but also touching on historical issues such as the Nixon Presidency and the Gulf of Tonkin incident. They are equally critical of the coverage given to Bush and Gore, in an impressive display of non-partisanship that is lacking in our media today. They encourage reporters to research the statements by candidates and to not simply accept the frame given to them by interested parties but to investigate and to put a truly fair and balanced frame around it. One issue that they note but could have gone into more detail on is that the media almost universally present issues as a for/against disagreement, whereas in reality there are often (I might argue almost always) more than two points of view on a given issue and the press ignores all but the two that are most easily reduced to sound bites.

"The Press Effect" suggests that the press should aggressively ferret out the truth of a situation as best it can and play the role of "custodian of facts" that is central to democratic governance. According to Jamieson and Waldman, in an election context, the press should understand the points of contest in a campaign and the relationship among promises, governance, and campaign biographies. It should reject spin and hold political candidates accountable. Jamieson and Waldman's central argument is that the press can fail in this assignment because it overly relies on narratives, or story lines. This reliance causes the press to ignore important facts. In the case of policy story lines involving global issues, such as press coverage after 9/11, Jamieson and Waldman confirm research indicating that patriotism and lack of debate in Congress affected the quality of reporting and analysis. Their critique does not, however, address the public opinion and policy consequences of heavy, repetitive, and visually oriented press coverage of the terrorist-piloted planes attacking the World Trade Center.

The Press Effect suggests the media frames issues and candidates in a way that their future stories on the subjects will tend to fit neatly inside the pre-conceived box. Since the media is a follow-the-leader game, once a frame takes hold it doesn't let go very easily. Jamieson and

Waldman use this theory mainly to explore the 2000 Election between Gore and Bush. Gore's many misstatements through his political career led the press to frame him as dishonest. Bush's flubs through his short political career convinced the press to put him in the frame of unintelligent. The result were campaign stories that asked voters to choose between the smart, but untrustworthy Gore and the dumb but affable Bush. The examples of media coverage in the book support this theory pretty well. Next the authors cite the examples of Gore's untruths and basically defend each one as a misunderstanding, leaving Gore as a more honest individual than painted by the media. As a reader, I anticipated the authors next explaining that Bush was actually a smarter man than he was given credit for, after all he has an MBA from Harvard. Instead the authors quote a New Yorker article where a reporter cites George W. Bush's average grades at Yale. This was a surprise, because the story was unverified by Yale and it doesn't take into account that grades have much more to do with ambition and drive than intelligence. There was no attempt to give Bush the same credit that the authors spent giving Gore. An opportunity to support their main thesis was left on the floor, which gives one the feeling that the real purpose of the book is to defend Gore not shame the media. This same pattern is repeated when the authors discuss the Florida recount. It's unfortunate that Jamieson and Waldman abandon the scholarly for the advocacy role because there is a lot of other research in the book that seems dead on. They bemoan that fact that reporters do a terrible job of verifying the evidence and drawing conclusions. Instead, the authors argue that the media play into the "he said, she said" game of political strategy. The story becomes about how the candidates disagree with each other on their positions more than the actual substance of those positions. They also state that the media loves to play psychologist when they should instead be playing fact-finder. I found the basic theories in the book supported by good evidence. But the advocacy of Gore and the silence on Bush in the analysis sections detracted from the book's purported goal of exposing the media's laziness. I'm sure that the authors would say that they had no intention of propping up Gore, but parts of the book seem to strengthen the media frame on Bush which weakens the overall argument of the book. This is surprising since Bush could have been defended as easily as Gore. Anyway, I think the authors do a fine job casting a spotlight on the media's "follow the leader" approach and that's enough to recommend it despite my other misgivings.

This is nicely written, not wordy or loaded with polysci jargon. She reviews national events, mostly political, and how the media covered or created them. It is rather painful but enlightening to see how some of the "what everybody knows" about a particular candidate started off as speculation by someone, then got quoted as fact by the rest of the pack. Another reminder of how gullible people

are so the media can lead us around by the nose and how important it is to be extremely skeptical about the way the media characterize candidates. Also I'm reminded how important it is to have sources from outside the US media market such as BBC.

The press is in crisis--it no longer serves its most important role, which is to cut through political spin to get at the facts. Jamieson and Waldman make a convincing case that the press is so intent on creating compelling storylines that it has lost its critical edge. For all journalists out there--please read it!

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