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Book review for Information, Communication & Society

Intimate politics: publicity, privacy and the personal lives of politicians in media-saturated democracies, by James Stanyer, 2013, Cambridge, Polity Press, 248 pages, £15.99/€20.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-7456-4477-6

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High-end news outlets face a dilemma any time a personal scandal involving a public figure erupts. They know that it would be beneath them to join the fray and report an extramarital affair as though it were news, but they feel in their bones that it is gold dust, especially if it can be framed as hypocrisy in light of said figure's previous pronouncements on family values or loyalty. Audiences too know that they really should not be drawn to this kind of news, but cannot look away when presented with it. Happily, there is a solution that allows reporters and readers alike to maintain a semblance of dignity, one that cannily moulds public interest out of merely what the public is interested in. This is meta-reporting: basing the story on how the rest of the media are covering it.

What, though, is at the heart of this appetite for intimate details about the lives of those in charge? On the journalistic side of things it is a combination of three factors: the ultimate gotcha moment upending the established narrative around a politician, a quasi-professional mission to cut the powerful down to size, and the simple maxim that sex always sells. Audience interest in the salacious is generally written off as a collective character flaw, a weakness for voyeurism that probably should not be indulged but usually is. But by thinking about how news media are experienced, it might just be possible to get beyond the assumption that sex scandals appeal only to our baser instincts and the argument over whether journalism has a duty to edify as well as inform.

Barbie Zelizer takes such an approach in her book *About to Die* (2010), investigating the irresistible pull of images depicting impending death. Instead of reducing this to rubbernecking at a car accident, she sees something more existential: a brief glimpse at our own mortality that is usually beyond us amid the routines of everyday life. It is possible that something similar is going on when we pay attention to the intimate lives of public figures. It is not all about schadenfreude, indeed it seems simplistic to assume that the experience is one of gleeful pleasure – it could just as well be the kind of news that is registered rather than pored over. If it is savoured then to imply as is usually the case that there is some kind of sexual impetus behind prurience might also be wide of the mark; there is also the empowering exercise of standing in judgement over another, especially someone with authority. And thinking about how this kind of content is encountered in everyday contexts points to their acting less as an outlet for uses and gratifications and more like an affective anchor. In an ideal world we would navigate our way with reference to values and principles, using the news as a lodestar. That this often fails is self-evident, and it would be understandable if consumers look at politicians' untuned beach

bodies, marital rows and bedroom farces not as objects of obsession but as ordinary markers of humanity.

With valid reason, this volume by James Stanyer does not explore the psychological or phenomenological underpinnings of the role that political intimacy plays in our news media. Based on a well-contextualised content analysis, it assesses the conditions under which both consensual and non-consensual exposure of the private lives of public figures is likely to proliferate, and tracks how the prevalence of content of this nature has changed over time. In both the introduction and conclusion it considers briefly whether this is a manifestation of the dystopian future imagined by Hannah Arendt and Richard Sennett, characterised by the dissolution of any meaningful boundary between what constitutes the public and private. Stanyer makes a credible claim that scandals should be seen not just as the publicisation of private life, but also its politicisation. Having referenced Frank Furedi early on, it would be interesting to consider the flipside of this: whether as a consequence of the blurring of the public/private distinction, political decision-making is increasingly driven by personal rather than public principle. In any case a consideration of Nancy Fraser's interventions on the public sphere would help to move the debate along.

As it is, Stanyer sets out three 'recipes' for predicting the visibility of national leaders' personal lives, encompassing a plausible combination of presidential politics, tabloid dominance of the news sector, generation and, slightly more elusively, a leader's need to connect personally with voters. Likewise, the propensity of different countries' news media to splash on infidelity stories is shown to be predicted by the influence of the Christian right in national politics, the size of the tabloid media and, again a little less neatly, the relative weakness of a nation's privacy culture. This last factor points to a difficulty inevitably faced by international comparative research, with unavoidably speculative passages about basic cultural differences in attitudes towards deference and privacy across western Europe, the United States and Australia, and composite variables that lose potency as the analysis proceeds. Admirably, though, Stanyer shows how stark the national comparisons are, as well as the unevenness of the relationships between causal factors across both time and space. It is especially illustrative to see which scandals crossed international borders and which did not, and an excellent point is made about the changing meaning of scandal historically: in the early years of news media, the scandal attached not to the sin committed but to the act of being publicly named.

Since the focus is mainly quantitative, little consideration is given to the work involved in constructing a believable and attractive private life that is part of any aspiring leader's job these days. There is now extensive published research on the personal journey industry sustained by presidential candidate autobiographies in the United States, less on kind of demotic performance seen as central to any political public relations campaign, often involving sports, taste in music or in David Cameron's case a predilection for pointing at fish in markets on holiday. Likewise, while references are made in general terms to the relations between the press and politicians in different countries, the detail of how this dance is performed at the individual and institutional level is mostly absent. This is not intended as criticism, but with growing interest in media research generally in production contexts it would be interesting to see what eventuates if political communication embraces more ethnographic methodologies.

Some of the data visualisations are less than helpful, with graphs charting visibility over time lacking x-axis gradations and indicators of significance, and others presenting simple counts of

publications or media appearances as percentages in a way that does not make sense in a small and selective sample. A more methodical dissection of the role of sites such as Gawker, Jezebel and the Huffington Post would have added substantially to the scope of this work, and scant attention is given to the impact of social media and cameraphones. There is also the odd factual error, with reference made to “an affair between Australian Labor Party politician Cheryl Kernot and Liberal MP Gareth Evans” – Kernot did later defect to Labor but was leader of the Australian Democrats at the time of the tryst; Evans was a senior figure in the Labor Party, most notably as foreign minister.

This, though, is just one liaison amongst innumerable others catalogued in this thoroughly researched work which is also well grounded in the literature on the personalisation of politics. It is especially commendable that the author resists the conventional narrative that media, and the rise of mass visual media in particular, are alone responsible for the proliferation of political intimacies across news agendas. Seeing so many sex scandals brought together in a single text has a strange effect on the reader – not inducing a sense of revulsion at the venality of our public figures, more of a sigh at their banality. And the press do not come across as corrupt and over-reaching, but rather as giddy and excitable. The result is that the book goes well beyond meta-reporting, sketching a cultural shift in attitudes towards public life and privacy in which politicians, journalists and audiences are all implicated. This was written in the aftermath of the phone hacking scandal in the UK, and the full implications for media regulation are yet to play out. The bigger question is the future of intimacy as political capital and media commodity, both subject to the law of diminishing returns as intimacy becomes embedded in the routines of news production and consumption.

Reference:

Zelizer, B. (2010). *About to die: How news images move the public*. Oxford: Oxford University press.