BOOK REVIEWS

Amber E. Boydstun. Making the News: Politics, the Media, and Agenda Setting. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2013. 280 pp. $25.00 (paper).

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In her book Making the News, Amber Boydstun’s claim that news explodes and fixates rather than ebbs and flows gradually will seem evident to anyone who pays attention to the news, especially on cable television. When she notes that the result of these patterns is that the media focus on a few issues extensively while paying little attention to most issues, the reader will no doubt nod in agreement, again thinking this is obvious. But her observation that we know little about what drives this pattern of news coverage may catch us off guard. With all the research out there on what the media cover about politics and the effects of news coverage, how is it possible that we have such an incomplete understanding about how issues make the news in the first place? But Boydstun demonstrates convincingly that existing theories on their own are inadequate to explain the familiar patterns in news coverage, and her book sets out to pull together these various perspectives to create and test a more complete theory of news generation that can account for the periods of explosive change and relative stability that characterize news coverage.

Boydston’s starting point is the media’s tendency toward two modes of reporting—the alarm mode where some event suddenly calls reporters’ attention to an issue and the patrol mode where the media regularly report on certain issues in a more traditional watchdog role. Because neither mode of reporting by itself fully captures the patterns of news coverage, Boydstun offers an alarm/patrol hybrid model in which news coverage is characterized by some periods in which the media pay sustained attention to a small number of issues until events and developments cause a single issue to explode into the news, sometimes leading to lasting changes in the media’s agenda. This model helps capture the dynamic nature of news generation that arises from the influence of both events and the institutional incentives of the news media. In an extensive theoretical discussion, Boydstun brings together several theories of news generation that integrate organizational factors, marketplace influences, and the practical reality of “disproportionate information processing” (the media cannot focus on all issues equally or even in proportion to their importance) to create a clearer picture of what influences the news, how momentum affects
news coverage, and ultimately how it creates predictable patterns of skewed attention across policy issues and explosive change in coverage of those issues.

While the theoretical foundation that Boydstun lays is valuable, she also delivers on her promise to test it empirically in a variety of settings. The theory holds up well under the different types of data she brings to bear on it, and this is a real strength of the book. With a mix of original data sets and creative use of existing data, particularly from the Policy Agendas Project, Boydstun tests her theory broadly to explain patterns and changes in front-page coverage of the New York Times from 1996 to 2006 as well as the more narrowly focused coverage of two specific issues—the death penalty and the war on terror. She also finds that the theory can be applied not just to national newspapers, but also to local, television, and online news.

Through sophisticated statistical analysis and simulations, the book offers important insights into the news-generation process. Most significant is Boydstun’s finding that the skew in the media’s agenda toward a small number of issues and the explosiveness in coverage of some issues cannot be understood as a result of events and attention scarcity alone. Institutional incentives—which she captures in part by measures of the attention of elites and the public to issues and the media’s own prior attention to issues—are also important. The book reminds us that the nature of the media system as an institution, not just the events and issues themselves, is an essential component in determining what the public sees in the news. Also emerging from the analysis is the key role that positive feedback plays in explaining why media explosions around some issues are followed by more consistent patrol-type coverage. Positive feedback in the form of public officials continuing to weigh in on the issue and to provide new frames for discussing it after an initial media explosion is an important factor in keeping an issue in the news. This finding is not only significant for understanding what the media cover, but it may also help explain and inform the political behavior of elites.

The book has little in the way of weaknesses. As is true in almost any extensive analysis of data, there are challenges in operationalizing some variables and questions about what variables should be included. As Boydstun herself notes, her analysis could not include the institutional setup of the media and the context, though they are important in what becomes news, because there simply were no adequate measures of these variables, but her extensive theoretical discussion of these factors should provide insights for future research. One could question the decision to use executive orders as a measure of presidential attention rather than presidential speeches, which might address more issues and are often more public. It is also not clear why in the analysis of coverage of the death penalty and the war on terror that policymaker attention is measured only by congressional hearings and does not include any measure of presidential attention, especially given the president’s powers and interest in the war on terror. But these are minor issues, especially in light of the valuable contributions of the book.
Overall, the book’s alarm/patrol model of news generation provides a much deeper understanding of how issues end up on the media’s agenda and the factors that influence whether they stay there for a while or fall back out of sight quickly. Boydstun’s discussion of the implications of her findings makes it clear why we need to understand this process. What the media decide to cover is important for accountability in a democracy, and knowing what factors influence those decisions can help us see the potential and limits of the media’s role as watchdog. A more complete picture of news generation also provides insight into the way politicians and public officials can influence news coverage and by extension accountability and outcomes in the political system. Boydstun’s successful effort to help explain what at first seems rather obvious provides an important contribution to political communication and is a must-read for scholars and others who want to understand the impact of news media on the political system.

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In Partisan Priorities, Patrick Egan takes up the concept of issue ownership. Whereas issue ownership in the literature repeatedly is demonstrated to be a key ingredient in voting behavior and a principal marker in party competition, its core as a concept has been virtually left behind. By devoting a book-length analysis to searching for the origins of issue ownership, Egan’s work will not go unnoticed in the literature. A research agenda on issue ownership was established by the seminal work of Petrocik in 1996. Nevertheless, Egan’s work is pioneering and will become a standard reference for any scholar interested in issue ownership.

Egan starts from Petrocik’s well-known definition of issue ownership—which party is best at handling an issue—and based on this, he identifies three constitutive elements of a party’s link to an issue: the party’s prioritizing of the issue and its performance and position on the issue. Since issue ownership, according to Egan, can derive equally from any of these elements, he turns to the empirics to settle its origins. Based on an impressive collection of surveys on 17 issues since 1970 in the United States, he conducts a series of empirical analyses to trace the origins of issue ownership. With great interest