

Joseph E Uscinski

The people's news: Media, politics, and the demands of capitalism

New York: New York University Press, 2014. 195 pp. ISBN 9780814764886

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In *The People's News: Media, Politics, and the Demands of Capitalism*, Joseph Uscinski proposes that audience demands shape the content and quality of news in the United States, and provides ample evidence to support this claim. Uscinski claims that to avoid going out of business, media firms must provide news content appealing to a sizable number of consumers, which results in low-quality news and an uninformed citizenry.

The book begins by outlining two theoretical paradigms that seek to explain news media content as the product of a top-down process, in which information providers determine news coverage. The first one, traditional journalism, proposes that news comes from independent journalistic judgment, aimed at providing the necessary information, encouraging participation, and setting the public agenda. The second model, supply-side, contends that news content is determined by those supplying the news: economic elites, government leaders, media firm owners, and journalists, with little regard to the welfare of democracy. Uscinski argues that both models fail to explain the quality of news because they are disconnected from the realities of markets, by which media outlets need to satisfy consumers' demands to remain viable businesses. A demand-side paradigm, in which audiences determine news content, accounts for the economic system and thus explains more aptly news content and its consequences.

The second chapter critiques the media-effects literature in general and agenda-setting theory in particular. Uscinski contends that news firms follow audiences' demands for information in choosing which stories to report more often than they influence the public's assessment of issue salience. To support this claim, Uscinski analyzes news coverage from the three televised national broadcast news program (ABC, CBS, and NBC) in relation to public opinion, measured by Gallup's Most Important Problem Question, and finds that news content is audience-driven in seven issue areas, and sets the public agenda in only four.

The third chapter examines how media firms meet audience demands for gratification by following their ideological and partisan preferences, reporting stories that make news consumers feel good about their previously held beliefs. Uscinski performs statistical analysis that indicates that as the American public as a whole turns more Republican or Democrat, issues that the public associates with either the Republican or the Democratic Party (such as Defense and Civil Rights, respectively) receive more coverage in the nightly news.

In chapter 4, the book examines the methods with which news firms track audiences' preferences and provides examples of news firms adjusting coverage according to consumers' opinions. In the final chapter, Uscinski argues that audience-led news hinders democracy and provides some guidelines for news outlets to improve the quality of their journalistic product, including limiting sensationalism, providing substantive information and higher quality commentators, displacing politics with policy, allowing less public voice, creating clearer demarcation between news and commentary, and achieving

ideological parity. However, the book ends on a somewhat pessimistic note, indicating that as news reflect society, the uneducated, uninterested, polarized public will continue to receive unsophisticated, non-relevant, biased news. The audience is more to blame than the producers, and unless society changes, the news will remain the same.

The People's News: Media, Politics, and the Demands of Capitalism provides a welcome fresh look into the processes driving news media content. Comparing nightly news content with audiences' issues concern and partisan leanings allows Uscinski to examine the book's central claim – audience demands drive the content and quality of news – from different angles and thus provide convincing evidence for his argument. However, a more nuanced account of the relationship between audience demands and news content, particularly one that took into account changes in market structure in the last three decades, would have helped the book make a stronger case. Uscinski mentions that broadcast outlets have faced competition from novel cable news outlets since the 1980s, and online news later on, but he does not differentiate periods in his statistical comparison of broadcast news and public partisanship and issue concerns. It would have been interesting to examine whether, as information outlets multiplied and consumer choices increased, audience demands determined news content even more strongly. Moreover, although Uscinski notes in chapter 2 that his statistical analysis does not explain why the media follow audience demands on some issues, while on other topics public concerns appear to follow media coverage, he does not provide alternative explanations for this phenomenon. Finally, the precision of the quantitative analysis is lacking from the most qualitative approaches to data. In particular, the account of how audience feedback changed news coverage about certain topics in chapter 4 appears to be largely anecdotic. Although these weaknesses might take some force out the book's argument, it is highly a commendable examination of the relationships between audience demands and news content, one that throws new light into an issue that has captured the attention of journalism scholars throughout the world.