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Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning (American Politics and Political Economy Series)

By W. Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just, Ann N. Crigler



Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning (**American Politics and Political Economy Series**) By W. Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just, Ann N. Crigler

Photo opportunities, ten-second sound bites, talking heads and celebrity anchors: so the world is explained daily to millions of Americans. The result, according to the experts, is an ignorant public, helpless targets of a one-way flow of carefully filtered and orchestrated communication. *Common Knowledge* shatters this pervasive myth. Reporting on a ground-breaking study, the authors reveal that our shared knowledge and evolving political beliefs are determined largely by how we actively reinterpret the images, fragments, and signals we find in the mass media.

For their study, the authors analyzed coverage of 150 television and newspaper stories on five prominent issues—drugs, AIDS, South African apartheid, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the stock market crash of October 1987. They tested audience responses of more than 1,600 people, and conducted in-depth interviews with a select sample. What emerges is a surprisingly complex picture of people actively and critically interpreting the news, making sense of even the most abstract issues in terms of their own lives, and finding political meaning in a sophisticated interplay of message, medium, and firsthand experience.

At every turn, *Common Knowledge* refutes conventional wisdom. It shows that television is far more effective at raising the saliency of issues and promoting learning than is generally assumed; it also undermines the assumed causal connection between newspaper reading and higher levels of political knowledge. Finally, this book gives a deeply responsible and thoroughly fascinating account of how the news is conveyed to us, and how we in turn convey it to others, making meaning of at once so much and so little. For anyone who makes the news—or tries to make anything of it—*Common Knowledge* promises uncommon wisdom.

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- Sales Rank: #723485 in Books
- Published on: 1992-10-15
- Released on: 1992-10-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x .60" w x 5.50" l, .56 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 190 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this ponderous but informative study, the authors argue that experts who see the public as a passive audience for the media or as uninformed voters ignore the complex ways in which people think about public issues. The authors conducted interviews and surveys regarding five current issues--including drug abuse and the 1987 stock market crash--to determine how people analyze information from newspapers, news magazines and television news programs. From these they conclude that people invoke morality more often than the media do. They found, contrary to accepted wisdom, that television is not the cause of public ignorance; rather, people who have "lower cognitive skills" are more likely to seek news from television. What people learn from the media, the authors suggest, depends on the their skills and education. They conclude that the media should present "less salient" topics with greater creativity but focus more on providing context and the hard news angle for provocative topics such as the AIDS crisis. Neuman teaches communications at Tufts; Just and Crigler are political scientists at Wellesley and USC, respectively. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.

About the Author

W. Russell Neuman is Professor of Media Technology at New York University.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Dan Williams:

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