

Radical Americas

Book review: Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*

John S. Huntington^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: jhuntington@gmail.com

¹ University of Houston, USA

Book Review

Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 336pp,
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*John S. Huntington**

The proliferation of mass media during the mid-twentieth century highlighted the brewing conflict between nascent conservatism and consensus liberalism in American politics. Historian Nicole Hemmer's 2016 book, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*, examines how conservative activists contributed to the right-wing movement by harnessing the political power of media activism. The recent historiography of conservatism has focused on non-governmental actors like free market think tanks, grassroots organizations and religious leaders. Within this conversation, Hemmer's monograph demonstrates that the first generation of right-wing media – a group she calls 'media activists' – is crucial to understanding the rise of modern conservatism.

Hemmer's overarching argument evinces that conservative media activists played a critical role in the formation and propagation of modern conservatism. Media leaders – notably Henry Regnery, William F. Buckley Jr., William Rusher and Clarence Manion – presented themselves as the conservative response to the preponderance of postwar liberalism. Far from bit players, Hemmer asserts, the right-wing media in fact transformed the political landscape by popularizing the idea of liberal media bias, defining conservatives as an oppressed

majority of ‘outsiders’, and championing political electability over ideological purity. Media activists were united by a scepticism of mainstream media objectivity and a suspicion that nefarious forces conspired to stifle conservative voices. These dual misgivings led them to advocate balanced coverage over objectivity in an effort to fracture the liberal consensus and create a friendly atmosphere for conservatism. In short, Hemmer’s work highlights how the right-wing media shaped conservative ideology and galvanized grassroots momentum.

Hemmer’s book is divided into four major parts – three chapters per section – that chronicle the coalescence and decline of the first generation of right-wing media activists. The first section, ‘Networks’, details how media activists founded multiple right-wing channels to balance what they viewed as the mainstream media’s liberal tilt. In the 1950s, key right-wing news outlets like *National Review*, the ‘Manion Forum’ radio programme and Regnery Publishing weaponized the concept of media bias, turning this ‘shared sense of exclusion’ into a rallying cry for grassroots conservative activism (p.48). As shown in the book’s second part, ‘Leaders’, media figures shepherded the burgeoning movement by advocating conservative news consumption and delineating the parameters of conservative ideology. They operated as both political agitators and ideological gatekeepers, disavowing far-right groups like the John Birch Society for casting a shadow of illegitimacy on conservatism. Despite lingering cleavages over ideological purity, media figures established themselves as pragmatic leaders and helped set the tone for mid-century right-wing activism.

During the late 1950s and into the 1960s, right-wing media activists pivoted toward direct political action to rupture the liberal consensus and the bipartisanship of postwar America. The book’s third section, ‘Elections’, illustrates how media leaders formed political action groups and endorsed conservative politicians to wrest American politics, particularly the Republican Party, away from liberal domination. Hemmer, like many other historians, casts the 1964 campaign as a touchstone for modern conservatism. Media activists used the grassroots fervor surrounding Goldwater to burnish right-wing activism. They formed political action committees, like the American Conservative Union, and dissociated respectable conservatism from the irresponsible conspiracy theories of the Birch Society. Media activists’ influence is further demonstrated in Part Four, ‘Adaptations’, which details how they stumped for Nixon on the basis of electoral pragmatism rather than ideological purity. Additionally, Hemmer describes this as the point when right-wing media activists shifted from outsiders to insiders

and ‘shift[ed] the meaning of objectivity from factuality to balanced reporting’ (p.210). However, within a few short years of Nixon’s downfall, the authority of the first generation of media activists waned as they lost the pulse of conservatism during the 1970s. Nevertheless, this first generation of media activists laid the foundation for the coming second wave – led by Rush Limbaugh and Fox News – and their efforts paved the way for the media emphasis on balance over objectivity and, more broadly, the deepening partisan divide in American politics.

Hemmer’s *Messengers* widens the literature on modern conservatism by illuminating how conservative media activists used perceptions of liberal bias and feelings of exclusion to galvanize the right-wing base. Media institutions penetrated the political mainstream, while the leaders operated as ideological sentries and political power brokers. Hemmer’s focus on media activists, particularly the sections on Regnery and Manion, provides a unique and heretofore underappreciated study of modern conservatism. However, Hemmer circumvents the contributions of far-right religious broadcasters, a group that shared a persecution complex with Hemmer’s subjects and formed an equally crucial component of the conservative activist media. Nevertheless, Hemmer’s trenchant analysis of right-wing media leaders will appeal to a wide array of scholars, from historians to communications experts, while filling a critical historiographical gap in the studies of modern conservatism.

Note

- * University of Houston, email:
jhuntington@gmail.com