

## **The British Press**

Mick Temple

*Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2008, £19.99*

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I will be recommending Mick Temple's *The British Press* as essential reading for academics, students and researchers seeking a robust interpretation of current debates on the political responsibilities of journalism.

Setting out with a conventional rehearsal of how the press has come to be the way it is, Temple discusses the popularisation of news and information from Gutenberg onwards. Most usefully, Temple highlights the nuances to emerge from the nineteen-forties, when the press became newly radicalised, saw retreats in sales and a loss of discursive control to broadcasting, and became instrumental in a broader "decline of deference". Other chapters offer clear and accessible accounts of the various approaches to analysing news, the production environment of post-Wapping, strategies of censorship both formal and informal, and the rise of public relations.

What turns out to be Temple's determinedly positive take on the development of the press is in evidence at these early stages, but it is in the later chapters that the book fully establishes its own position. In his chapter on "dumbing-down" – a term normally used in condemnation – Temple insists that the press's style of dealing with politics has simply moved in accord with wider societal developments. Media choice has broadened and become ever-more motivated by immediacy and entertainment, press interest in politics ponders the spectacle rather than the fine detail, celebrity and glamour are now to the fore of every news realm; all seen by Temple as necessary to maintain readership approval. Temple takes issue what he sees as the reductivism of the academic debates on these trends. Looking to the former broadsheet papers, Temple argues that while there may be less of an emphasis on the weighty politics of old, this has been replaced by the new politics of an inclusive citizenry that takes account of issues from the domestic sphere and the ethics of everyday living. Dumbing-down, in Temple's account, needs to be defended. The position of the local press – a sector of the industry neglected in many similar books – is more complex. Temple concedes that coverage of local politics has declined, but insists that

a shift towards the popularisation agenda is necessary for local papers to continue to appeal to a disparate local audience, now acclimatised to tabloid-style reporting.

In his concluding chapter, Temple addresses the argument that the future of newspapers will be, at least partly, determined by how they respond to an online environment. To succeed, in his assessment, newspapers need to continue to bend to the shifting norms of communication – to continue to dumb-down – embracing a pithiness of expression and flexibility of agenda. Temple argues convincingly that the press need to be ruthless in exploiting the professionalism and material resources behind the news that they produce, thereby setting themselves in contrast to the regiments of “citizen journalists”.

There is much in Temple’s book with which I fundamentally disagree. “Politics” is defined too liberally, in my view, and has become divorced from informed democratic action. Also, the prejudicial and spiteful campaigns of the popular press are mentioned (p. 70) but not explored to the extent promised. Yet in spite of my many disagreements, and often because of them, I found reading *The British Press* an enjoyable and enlightening experience. I am grateful to Temple for writing such an audacious book, and I fully expect it to inspire much discussion among students and academics.

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