



Breaking the News

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In *BREAKING THE NEWS: HOW THE MEDIA UNDERMINE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY*, James Fallows accuses his mass media colleagues of failing to hold up their end in the quest to fulfill the dream of American democracy. As Washington editor for *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, a regular commentator on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," and author of an award winning book on national defense, Fallows is able to criticize the media as a respected insider. As a result, this book has drawn considerable media attention.

Fallows' critique is multifaceted. He faults the media for shortsighted commercialism, which, in turn, leads to acute overemphasis on the "horse race" aspects of politics, heavy doses of cynicism rather than a balanced view of how politicians and government perform, and a superficial approach to news bereft of much needed historical context. He also faults selected media "stars" for putting monetary gain ahead of professional integrity. These shortcomings damage not only American democratic institutions, but the creditability of the media as well. As a result, both receive low approval ratings from the American public.

There is hope, according to Fallows, in an emerging commitment to what he calls "public journalism." The section on public journalism, however, is brief and underdeveloped.

The book has additional weaknesses. Fallows draws broad conclusions from evidence that is anecdotal and fragmentary. He also fails to deal thoroughly with the complex triangular relationship between the media, political institutions, and the public. This omission substantially blunts Fallows' critique.

Still, Fallows offers a compelling alternative both to the media's smug self-image and the right-wing portrayal of the media as a sinister liberal conspiracy.

Sources for Further Study

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