Keith J. Butterick

Complacency and collusion: A critical introduction to business and financial journalism

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This book opens by questioning why business and financial journalism acts like puppets when dealing with public companies and financial public relations, implicating it in crises such as the 2008 crash. Butterick critically studies this by investigating the relationship between the industry and the discourse of capitalism, seeing the complacency and collusion embedded in this industry as a reflection of capitalism.

By interrogating how business and financial journalism failed to warn of the financial crisis and the underlying reasons, Butterick may not intend to condemn the industry. Instead, he reminds us to rethink our role in the capitalism discourse, in his exploration of the interrelationships between the wider socio-economic backdrop and the industry of business and financial journalism. This is the significant merit of this book and makes it a timely contribution.

The first six chapters will satisfy those with an obsession with exact times and prestigious names from different phases in the evolution of business reporting since the 18th century. The latter six chapters explore the modern industry, which emerged after the Second World War and featured new layouts and designs.

Butterick's personal experience as a financial and business journalist (he was the business editor of 'Yorkshire on Sunday', for example) as well as working in financial public relations proves an asset. The chronological studies of the evolutions of business and financial journalism give readers a sense that the media's failure to warn of financial crisis is not new. Furthermore, the chapters discussing the modern industry of business and financial journalism are supported by the author's analysis of media content of busi- ness sections and supplements of the UK's national newspapers, as well as interviews with correspondents and editors.

Butterick contends in Chapters 7 and 9 that the media is exposed to, and contributes to, a capitalist economy which naturalises financial bubbles (p. 86), the growth of a company and the success of the market for the sake of shareholder value (p. 88; pp. 126–127), the masculine nature of business (p. 126), the high pay of chief executives (p. 129) and the demonisation of trade unions and their activities (p. 135). It is the conceptual back- ground of capitalism economy that constrains the journalistic representations of business and financial issues, which reinforce the discourse of capitalism in return.

Butterick also inquires specifically into the interplay between economic philosophies, an indispensable element of the capitalism economy, and business and financial journalism in Chapter 11. In the eyes of the free market economist Friedrich Hayek, journalists and commentators were regarded as ‘second-hand dealers in ideas’ (p. 160), and were the targets and channels for the spread of economic paradigms. Butterick looks at the intel- lectual credibility that the media outlets such as *The Times* and *Financial Times* and their commentators established for neoliberalism. For example, both newspapers delivered the neoliberal ideas and were accepted by British politicians such as Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher. A similar situation happened again in the media’s attitude to the recent austerity policy in the United Kingdom. The financial and business pages again acted as cheerleaders of the austerity policy instead of questioning its efficiency.

Besides the wider societal and cultural background, Butterick’s analysis also includes a focus on industry pressures, such as the declining advertising incomes, the competition from the newly emerging digital platforms, the heavier workloads, the lack of well-trained media practitioners (Chapter 8) and the compliance with public companies and financial public relations (Chapter 10).

Bridging the gap of the information asymmetry between public companies and the public should be the ultimate objective of financial and business journalism. Nevertheless, the ‘greed and self-interest’ (p. 169) embedded in capitalism, of which the financial and busi- ness journalism is also a part, seems to be the largest obstacle. So what is the solution?

Butterick’s suggestions seem lukewarm. The book does introduce high points of the financial and business journalism, such as the professionalism codes promoted by fig- ures like Charles Duguid (the former City editor on the *Daily Mail*) in the late 19th century and the warning of too much personal and business debt by journalists such as Martin Wolf of *Financial Times* before the 2008 financial crisis. Butterick quotes the words of Jane Fuller (a former financial editor on the *Financial Times* and co-editor of the Centre for the Study of Financial Innovation) calling for a return of professionalism: ‘Journalists need to relearn the old habits of scepticism, fearless questioning, digging for information, spotting connections and taking pride in their independence’ (p. 92). One solution might be Professor Steve Barnett’s concept of ‘slow journalism’, building on the BBC’s idea of ‘slow news’, which refers to fact-checking reports and in-depth analysis. Even then there are limits – even if the journalist is professional enough (as defined by Fuller) to cover the issue, how should business and financial journalism regulate the distance between media practitioners and the discourse of capitalism?

While the book may be short of solutions it will induce wide debate about and proposals for future business and financial journalism and is excellent reading material for both investors relying on business/financial news outlets and for scholars.