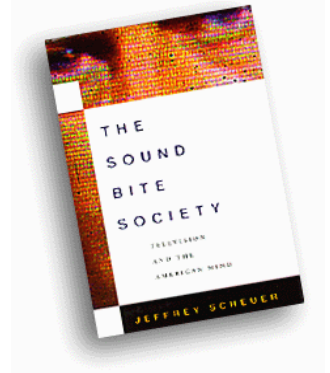




## The Sound Bite Society: Television and the American Mind



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**Jeffrey Scheuer**  
***Four Walls Eight Windows* (1999)**

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*The Sound Bite Society* combines critical observations on the relationships between television and its audiences with an unapologetic defense of progressive democratic citizenship. As a commentary on the impacts of television on public thought and politics, Scheuer covers familiar ground that is treated in superior fashion in such volumes as Hart's *Seducing America* (1999) and Jamieson's *Dirty Politics* (1992). As a work of progressive political theory aimed at a lay audience, Scheuer may aggravate those who study the form and function of political ideologies in a more robust fashion. Readers who consider themselves conservatives will surely be quite peeved by what they read. Taken together, Scheuer's critical reflections are indeed provocative, and pose questions that demand attention.

Scheuer's primary argument can be summed up thusly:

- Television inherently simplifies complex ideas into emotional, self-oriented moral and political impulses;
- Television therefore impedes public consideration of complexity, ambiguity and connectedness in political and social issues--a stance Scheuer identifies with political liberalism--and subsequently advances a conservative political ideology that limits the possibilities for truly democratic public discourse (pp. 10-11).

This argument draws connections between the form and functions of television on the one hand and the alleged decline of liberalism and ascent of a new "Electronic Right" since the Reagan '80s on the other.

In Chapters One and Two, Scheuer argues that conservatives have been far more successful than progressives at exploiting the possibilities of television. He describes television as a "dream medium" for the right (p. 32) due to five key foci of the medium: *immediacy and superficiality*, *institutional amnesia*, *passivity and narcissism*, *conformity and homogeneity*, and a privileging of *the existential self* (pp. 32-40). He also presents a "grammar" of television, describing the medium as a "surrogate eye" that provides a selectively organized and condensed "encoded simulacrum" (p. 63) of real experience. Chapter Three integrates these structural elements into a discussion of television's impacts on perceived reality. The viewer's experience of televisual reality is a complex one: We trust television as a source of truth, but we also distance ourselves from "telereality" because it is more structured, predictable and satisfying than the real thing.

All of this is familiar territory, however. The real political bite of Scheuer's argument comes in the last two chapters. In Chapter Four, Scheuer presents a grand ideological continuum. On one end is a "complexitarian" framework that assumes a multiplicity of integrated and interdependent elements existing in complicated, uncertain relationships. Scheuer holds that this mindset descriptive of a liberal or progressive political ideology, while a more "simplex" framework--privileging clear and rigid distinctions, few and simple rules, the visible and apparent, and the isolated individual--is descriptive of a conservative ideology.

In several spots in this chapter (as in those earlier), Scheuer attempts to describe these differences without being judgmental, emphasizing the validity and relevance of both ideological visions. However, he exposes his true political colors when highlighting a recurrent ideological equation, which might be summed up as follows:

- American political culture is driven by the opposing influences of simplex free-market capitalism--which defines and maintains different class interests--and complex political democracy--which attempts to negotiate these differences;
- Conservatism is a simplex ideology about maintaining divisions and distinctions, while liberalism is a complex ideology better equipped to consider connections and relationships;
- Therefore, liberalism is inherently more egalitarian, more tolerant, and ultimately more democratic than conservatism.

Chapter Five advances a "critical vision" of skepticism and complex, analytical thinking to combat the simplex impulses of televisual politics. He describes "critical thinking" as akin to question-asking and informal logic; a mode of analysis

to promote clarity, consistency, and completeness, and to expose fallacy, simplification, superficiality, and otherwise weak, irrelevant, or unacceptable arguments. (p. 162)

Scheuer describes such a critical mindset as complexitarian, but one might also describe it as an exercise of dividing and distinguishing between reified absolutes to find truth (to borrow from Scheuer's description of conservative thought). Did Scheuer not earlier criticize conservatism for overemphasizing such values as "clarity, consistency and completeness?" Of course, the answer is that critical thought demands both complex *and* simplex modes of analysis and evaluation. Scheuer freely admits as much, but in doing so starts to erode the *distinctions* he draws between how liberals and conservatives think and speak.

The author also discusses a series of familiar correctives in media education and journalistic practice to foster civic dialogue and ideological debate. He argues that the goals of critical democratic citizenship should "at least partly transcend ideology, such that "dignified . . . thoughtful conservatives" can "side with liberals" (pp. 171-172). Note that no mention is made here of undignified or unthoughtful *liberals* joining the civic community; perhaps they don't exist?

Scheuer reveals his ideological preferences in ways that tend to undercut his argument. While claiming that the left is "not incapable of polemic" (p. 166)--which seems quite the understatement if one were to consider a Jerry Brown or an Al Sharpton to typify liberals as Scheuer uses Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich to typify conservatives--he asserts that leftist polemics are different, that they are "hobbled by the underlying complexity of their underlying values and ideals" (p.167). He wonders aloud why sound bites have not arisen to champion traditional liberal causes as they have conservative ones, and answers that the latter are simpler, and thus inherently more telegenic than the former. One statement sums up Scheuer's ideological tell:

Liberalism falters on television and radio most of all because, unlike the polemical pyrotechnics on the right, it is serious and complex. (p. 191)

By extension, conservatism is not serious, not complex. It is "buccaneering . . . narrow and insular . . . bigoted . . . passiv[e] and narcissistic" (p. 191). On the other hand, as he argues earlier in the book, there

are no liberal Limbaughs. Apparently, despite Scheuer's self-described margin of agnosticism, some ideologies are more equal than others.

It is at these moments that Scheuer muddies an otherwise intriguing argument. He utterly fails to consider, for instance, the underlying tensions and complexities--especially between the opposing forces of religious, social fundamentalism and market-oriented individualism--that drive conservative ideology. Scheuer also ignores the potential for contemporary liberal leaders to capture the popular imagination and occasionally drive public opinion and debate. The sound bite success rate on the left is smaller than on the right since 1980, to be sure, but is it due solely to the inherent nature of television--or perhaps to the possibility that most liberals, to date, just haven't been very good at it?

Scheuer reminds the reader often that complexitarians embrace ambiguities and contradictions. His argument style seems to actually reinforce his seemingly incontrovertible case (which is ambiguous, at times contradictory, in many instances overly simplistic in its depiction of liberal and conservative philosophy and politics... but all of this is complexitarian in spirit and therefore very democratic of him).

Ideological aggravations aside, *The Sound Bite Society* fulfills its promise "to intrigue and provoke, not to settle any matters with finality" (pp. 13, 14), providing a descriptive account of television's relationship to political ideology. It echoes the sentiments and findings of familiar communication scholars in language, style and compact length that will be accessible for an upper-level undergraduate audience in media studies or political communication. This book will certainly generate spirited class discussions on a variety of levels. Those looking for academic rigor to extend one's scholarly pursuits or to introduce these ideas to graduate students might look elsewhere. But *The Sound Bite Society* certainly has the potential to educate and stimulate a larger lay audience who might not otherwise consider these two very important social forces that will continue to impact American political culture.

One final note: Scheuer's book is being published in paperback this fall by Routledge under the title *The Sound Bite Society: How Television Helps the Right and Hurts the Left*. I have reviewed the earlier hardcover edition, so this review will not reflect any potential revisions in the new edition.

## References

1. Hart, R.P. (1999). *Seducing America: How television charms the modern voter* (revised edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
2. Jamieson, K.H. (1992). *Dirty politics: Deception, distraction and democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
3. Scheuer, J. (1999). *The sound bite society: Television and the American mind*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows

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