

Chapter 11

Democratizing the Media

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We are all familiar with the hyper-commercialization of our culture. We see media culture and entertainment increasingly merged with the marketing needs of large corporations – the direct sellers, the media companies, the advertisers and the marketers that subsidize much of our media. It is proving to be a disaster, in many regards, for our culture.

Corporate marketing needs undermine the traditional argument that our commercial media system gives the people what they want. That was always a half truth, at best. But, increasingly, we have a situation where corporate media give the people what they want within a range of options designed to maximize profits for a handful of companies. Then, when people consume the media product, they say that is exactly what they want, because those are the choices they had.

The degradation of journalism is of direct interest to me and the subject of much of my work. It manifests itself in a lot of ways, not the least of which is a lack of hard, critical coverage of people in power and a genuine lack of debate over issues. Today most of those issues center on post September 11 policy and alternatives to it. That is the starting point for my analysis.

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Trends

There are two recent trends that contribute to the decline of journalism as a democratic force in the United States. One of them is the corporate control of journalism. Concentrated corporate control and its attendant commercialism converts journalism into profit seeking for shareholders. One example is that, in the past ten or fifteen years, we have seen the rise of business journalism – news for the investor and manager class. Business journalism has come to play a very large role in what is regarded as journalism in this country.

At the same time, we have seen the almost complete collapse and elimination of news about labor. Because journalism is becoming a response to market pressure, business audiences are much more lucrative and much more profitable to exploit than working class audiences.

The other factor that has hurt journalism has been the concerted and aggressive Right Wing assault upon us. In the mid 1970s, neo-liberal, pro-business, anti-government regulation, right wing groups started organizing, aggressively, to influence the production of ideas in this country, both in universities and in the media. The right wing has actively and successfully promulgated the myth that the media are liberal. The effect has been creation of an enormous double standard in the political coverage of our news media.

For example, the President is associated with a scandal in his own business career. But, as the *Financial Times* said earlier this year, he has proposed to legislatively outlaw exactly what he did to get rich. Yet the media have given virtually no serious attention to this double

standard. By comparison, a far smaller crime, Whitewater, led to years and years of special investigations. That was due to concerted right wing jawboning. Journalism has become so intimidated that it will treat right wing politicians and ideas far more charitably than it will others.

Control

Some might say that we have no control over what has happened. That is not true. The media system in the United States is the direct result of government policies. It has always been that way.

Large media companies in America are the direct beneficiaries of lavish government subsidies and highly favorable rules and regulations – for example, monopoly licenses to television and radio channels. That is an extreme form of government-created and enforced monopoly rights.

All of our media companies have been predicated on having these wonderful government policies and subsidies given to them. This is not necessarily a bad thing, per se. At the time of the founding of this nation, there were serious debates about media policy. It wasn't called media policy then, but several sections of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the initial body of legislation that emanated out of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights dealt directly with how to establish a media system.

Probably the two most thoughtful Founding Fathers in this regard were James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Neither of them believed that we should just turn over the media system to the private sector. There were explicit policies, such as lavish postal subsidies to all newspapers and magazines, that were put in place to try to encourage and foster a vibrant media system.

Corruption

The problem we face today is that, while we have policies and subsidies that put this media system in place, the policy making process by which the government arrives at these policies and subsidies is extraordinarily corrupt. Today's policy making process is light years away from what Madison and Jefferson had in mind when they debated the role of the Post Office and of printing subsidies for newspapers in the 1790s.

Present government media policy is framed well by a scene from the great 1974 Academy Award-winning film, *The Godfather, Part II*. Hyman Roth and Michael Corleone are sitting on a rooftop in Havana in 1958, with a bunch of other American gangsters. You see them dividing up the country. Hyman Roth is cutting pieces of a cake with the shape of Cuba on it. He is giving each of the gangsters a slice of the cake. And while they are doing this, they are talking about what a wonderful government they have in Cuba, where free enterprise is appreciated.

That is exactly how media and communication policies are enacted in the United States. There is an enormous cake that Michael Powell, the Chairman of the Federal Communications

Commission (FCC), and Members of Congress are cutting up. It is shaped like the United States, or even the world, for that matter. Lobbyists are duking it out with each other, each trying to get the biggest slice of the cake. Much like those gangsters on the rooftop in Havana, today's corporate lobbyists want us to believe that it is their cake and nobody else gets a slice.

They believe that nobody else should be allowed to take part in the debates or have any role whatsoever. It is purely the realm of a handful of very large, extraordinarily powerful corporations. That is the problem we face today with media and media reform.

There is a saying that, if you're not at the table, you are not going to be a part of the deal. What has been missing from the table of media policy making in this country for some time is organized public participation.

Reversing Corruption and Democratizing Debate

How can we reverse the present corruption? First, we must democratize policy making. As long as the system remains on the Havana rooftop, sort-to-speak, we are going to get results with certain people on top of that rooftop and no one else – it serves them, first and foremost. We have to bring popular participation into media policymaking – so that the public gets something from these policies. Media policy must serve democracy and the people, not simply corporate interests. The corporate sector fears the democratic power of the people like nothing else. Much of my research, historically and through the present day, has documented the

obsession of the private lobbyists – the commercial lobbyists, the corporate lobbyists – with keeping this policymaking process behind closed doors and out of the light of day.

Second, we need to provide a range of viable reforms for media that can create and spawn a well-subsidized, high-quality journalism and entertainment culture. All of the ideas that I have been working on and am in favor of are what lawyers like to call content-neutral and viewpoint-neutral. None of them say, for example, fire Rush Lumbaugh and replace him with Jim Hightower. As wonderful an idea as that is, it is not the right policy. I don't envision the sort of political movement we need as being the progressive alternative to the right wing. I see it as a *principle* movement to democratize debates and open more space in the system for a wide range of well-funded viewpoints.

Pessimism

There are numerous reasons for pessimism about the feasibility of a democratizing movement. Not the least is the current state of the FCC. As some of you may know, the FCC is in the process of reviewing the handful of remaining ownership restrictions on media corporations in this country. These are very important media ownership restrictions. One prohibits the ownership of newspapers and television stations in the same town. Another one limits the number of television stations a single company can own in a town or nation.

FCC chairman Michael Powell is on record as basically saying he has contempt for very notion of public service. He believes that the free market should be allowed to regulate all

media, despite the fact that the types of markets we are talking about, which were set up by the government with massive subsidies, are the antithesis of anything remotely close to the competitive market that Mr. Powell loves to invoke. In fact, having Michael Powell as the defender of the public interest in communications in the United States is like having Katherine Harris being in charge of Al Gore's recount team. It is preposterous. So there are grounds for pessimism, and the 2002 election further removed Congressional checks on Michael Powell.

Optimism

Yet there are some reasons for optimism. First and foremost, in the last two to three years, many Members of Congress have wised up to the importance of media. I have spoken to a good half dozen at length. I have done town meetings with packed houses on corporate control of media. This last summer, I briefed Members of Congress. Many members, and not the least of whom was the wonderful Paul Wellstone, committed to working on this issue. Since the 2002 election, four Members of Congress have called me to say that, in the next two years, we need to work on radio station ownership, commercial carpet bombing of children and antitrust policy.

This is a time to plant the seeds for the long term fight that is in front of us. It is not something we are going to win by pushing a button and winning overnight. But we must start planting the seeds, now.

The other reason for optimism is that the general public is appalled by the way our media system is structured. They don't like the results. When people hear about the corrupt nature by

which large companies receive tens and hundreds of billions of dollars in welfare and subsidies, behind closed doors, the public is appalled. This reaction is bipartisan. The issue cuts across the political spectrum in many ways – once you get it out in the public eye.

The issues must be placed on the table so that politicians are made to answer to the public. What that is going to require is funding for first rate, experienced field organizers to take the issue to the public – outside the Beltway and across America. I personally am pursuing fund raising for such organizers. We need to mobilize organized labor, religious groups, college campuses, teachers, pediatricians, Kiwanis Club, Rotary – and anyone who wants to know about what is happening in media and about the need for public involvement. An integral part of this grassroots organizing will be work with those Members of Congress who are more than willing right now to sponsor reform legislation on a whole variety of fronts.

The moral of the story is that politics is really pretty simple, even though it goes back a few thousand years. As Saul Alinski said, if you want to beat organized money, you need organized people. Right now, we need to work aggressively to organize the people.

Questions and Answers

Bruce Kiernan:

Are there any philanthropies funding what you are doing?

Robert McChesney:

The good news is that a lot of philanthropists increasingly recognize the importance of media policy and the need for subsidizing alternative and independent media, as well as media education and media literacy. There are many fronts on which this battle must be carried out. I now am focusing on getting organizers in the field – really good people, with experience. No one else presently is proposing or carrying out such organizing. This is a new step, and we are just starting. But the response, so far, has been very heartening, I think we will get funding.

Yvonne Scruggs Leftwich:

Professor McChesney, I am interested in the grassroots organizing context for this effort. It is difficult to mobilize people without a group that is going to take the mobilization to the next level and that is going require that action be taken.

Robert McChesney:

You are absolutely right. Grassroots work is what it is all about. In the short term, it is feasible for people to get into the field, like John Appleseed – just planting seeds, just getting the

issue in play. Initially, we would not attempt to organize a mass movement with members. I think that might be the next stage – and we would approach groups that already are organized.

Here is an example. Right now, we are facing these FCC deregulation hearings in Congress. But deregulation is getting absolutely no press coverage whatsoever. Ideally, we should have had organizers out the last three or four years, doing what I have proposed – all the federations, religious groups, educational groups, pediatricians, environmentalists, feminist groups, civil liberties and many others. Groups that have a real stake in what Congress decides. They would be up to speed on the issues. They would be able to swing into gear with a high-powered campaign, on a moment's notice. Presently, none of that exists. None of the people who already are organized are up to speed on the issues.

I am talking about organizing to make an impact at the federal level. But keep in mind that a great deal of organizing already takes place at the local level. That is a start. Billboard monopolies are negotiated locally. Cable television franchises are negotiated locally. Commercialism in schools is a local issue, for the most part. There are a lot of things you can work on and actually win – not easily, but if you do your organizing, you have a good chance to win at the local level. We need to encourage local organizing, and use it to empower groups for organizing at the federal level.

Yvonne Scruggs Leftwich:

What kind of congressional mandate would cause your kind of media oversight to occur? You have Michael Powell, who is the fox sitting outside the chicken coop. You have

congressional leaders who individually may speak to the issue of an independent media. But, collectively, Members of Congress seem immobilized – paralyzed from doing anything that’s useful.

Robert McChesney:

Most of the policies that are crucial are at the congressional level – at the federal level. Congress is the agency that budgets and enforces these policies. The FCC responds to Congress. If the Congress is immobilized, the FCC will get its way. And you are right. We don’t have sufficient numbers in Congress to win. The lobbyists control the FCC, like the rooftop in Havana. It will take a while. But we have seen a dramatic change in Congressional interest in these media issues over the last few years. We must build on that change.

Emmett Folgert:

The idea of beginning with advertising directed at twelve year olds sounds like a real winner. On the one hand, if the corporations are going to have great influence on our culture, they have to start when we are very young. Many of us are concerned about the thuggish and bestial images through which our children are portrayed, at a young age, especially through film and music. The Right Wing will probably agree, because they think that a lot of the advertising is too sexualized. So this issue can be a political winner and something we should look at.

Marilyn Melkonian:

What were the politics that created C-SPAN?

Robert McChesney:

C-SPAN was created by the cable industry as a public relations mechanism to prevent aggressive regulation by the government – because the cable industry takes advantage of its monopolies to jack up rates, dramatically, all the time. C-SPAN is about protecting monopoly power from public regulation.

Since 1996, for example, cable rates have gone up four or five times the rate of inflation – because the cable industry has so much monopoly power and control of the politicians. The cable industry is saying (I’m paraphrasing), “Sure, we are ripping you off, but look, we are giving you coverage of the House and Senate at no charge. So, we are giving you a little public service.” This is what we are getting in exchange for monopoly privileges.

I have no qualms with C-SPAN. I watch it a lot. But, at the same time, it’s certainly not a satisfactory exchange for the enormous gifts that these companies are getting. The people should get a lot more. And we should have a right to determine exactly what we want in exchange.