

McChesney, R. W. & Nichols, J. (2002). *Our media, not theirs: The democratic struggle against corporate media*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

**The World We Share
By Barbara Ehrenreich**

Whatever concerns motivate you as a citizen—education, tax policy, health care, gay rights, campaign finance reform—there is no escaping the media. Run a candidate for office, and you'll have to hope her message doesn't get lost when it's squeezed into the increasingly microscopic soundbites favored by TV news. Stage a protest demonstration, and you must worry about whether it will get any coverage—or whether the coverage it gets will turn out to be so warped that you'll wish the media hadn't covered it at all. Or maybe you just want to educate the public about an issue you're all fired up about. Where are you going to turn if not to the media? There's just no other way to communicate with large numbers of other people—to make a point, raise an issue, and begin to flex your muscles as a free citizen of a democratic nation.

The media are as inescapable and ubiquitous a presence in our lives as the environment. In fact, they are, to a large extent, the mental and cultural environment we inhabit every day, bringing us the first voices we hear in the morning, the opinions we absorb while driving, the stories and images that entertain us after work. Insofar as we are intelligent social beings, the media are the world we share.

But the media are more than just an "environment" or a kind of neutral space where ideas, images, and opinions compete for our attention. In the last few years, the media have become a contentious issue in their own right. There's a groundswell of public concern about violence in the media, which may be useful for capturing the attention of channel-surfers, but almost certainly seems to have a morally desensitizing effect on the viewer. There's a growing worry about the impact of relentless media-transmitted advertising, especially on children, but ultimately on all of us as the advertising slops over into the "content" of a program or an article. And we are just beginning to understand all the ways the news media, in particular, subtly shape public policy and debate: Sensationalized crime coverage, for example, lays the groundwork for grotesquely punitive criminal justice measures like "three strikes and you're out." Grossly inadequate coverage of foreign news leaves us increasingly clueless in an era of globalization.

The problem has always been what to do about it. We can write cranky letters to the editor; we can turn off our TVs. But these are tiny gestures. How can we really affect something as pervasive and powerful—vast, and at the same time, intimate—as the media environment we live in? Here's where Robert McChesney and John Nichols come in. What they show in *Our Media Not Theirs* is that control of the media is becoming a political issue in countries all over the world—a subject for debate and potentially for legislation. It can happen here too, if we are willing to take the next step beyond griping: We can build a grassroots movement to counter the sleaze, the distortions, and the mind-numbing materialism of our unaccountable and corporate-dominated media.

Imagine the kind of media that a democratic society deserves: Media that bring us a wealth of diverse opinions and entertainment options; media that are held responsible for providing us with the information we need to function as informed citizens; media where ideas flow in both directions, and where ordinary people routinely have a chance to voice their concerns. If you like that picture, put yourself into it today by joining the

struggle for media reform. McChesney and Nichols have shown us what is possible; now it falls to all of us to realize that potential with our activism.

**In An Honest Debate
By Ralph Nader**

Not too long ago, I opened a press conference in Salt Lake City by looking into the television cameras and talking about the fact that the people, not the multinational communications corporations, own the airwaves.

That's one way to make media an issue. But – as Bob McChesney and John Nichols point out, it's not the only way. In countries around the world, trade unionists, indigenous people, political activists, and ordinary citizens have put media on the agenda. Now, argue McChesney and Nichols, we the people of the United States need to make media a part of the national debate in the land where the founders guaranteed freedom of the press because they knew democracy required rich and diverse sources of information and ideas.

McChesney and Nichols are right.

We all need to start talking about the fact that the people of the United States own the broadcast airwaves; they're the landlords. The radio and the television stations are the tenants. The corporations that own those stations should be paying the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) for the airwaves and some of that money should be recycled into developing television for the people. The rent money should be paying for audience-run networks that serve the people, that serve democracy, that treat serious matters in engrossing ways.

We all need to start talking about the fact that multinational corporations should not be allowed to dictate to the government the limits that will be placed on competition in the broadcast and print media sectors. We all need to start talking about the power that the people have to use existing antitrust and broadcast regulations—as well as new laws and new technologies—to break up monopolies and open up a true, wide-ranging democratic dialogue in this country.

There are corporate supremacists who say that issues of media ownership and content are too complex, too abstract to be issues for political debate. But the big corporatists, and those who make apologies for them, are not talking to the people.

When I bring up media issues with citizens in Salt Lake City and Atlanta, Detroit and Nashville, Los Angeles and Denver, I always find that the people get it. They get it 100 percent.

People know the media are betraying their public trust. Whether it's what's on the TV—the exploitation, the commercialism—or the news and public service programming that isn't on the TV, people know that what they're getting is not what they want or need. When I bring the discussion down to a question of what is and what isn't being covered on the evening news in their own neighborhoods and communities, when I go through how the local news breaks up the thirty minutes—the packaged crime news, the sports, the weather, the phony chitchat—it all connects with what people instinctually know about the disproportionate allocation of television news time.

When anyone talks about what's wrong with media today, and about how citizens should have the power to make meaningful change, people get excited. People like the idea of controlling some of what they own, and they're pretty shocked when they hear that the government gives away the airwaves to the radio and the television conglomerates.

In an honest debate, the side that argued for the status quo as regards media wouldn't get five percent support. That's why we need to open up that honest debate. It won't be easy. But this book will help. You hold in your hands a key to unlocking the corporate media chains that have shackled real freedom of the press and real democracy in this country for all too long. Use it!

Renewing Tom Paine's Challenge

By Noam Chomsky

Two hundred years ago, Tom Paine issued a call to "recover rights" that had been lost to "conquest and tyranny," thereby opening "a new era to the human race." The call to action that follows renews Paine's challenge. The rights that an aroused citizenry must recover, in the present case, are among those most essential to a truly functioning democracy: the right to information and to free and open discussion, not filtered by the state-corporate nexus that has effectively shaped the major media into instruments of class power and domination.

Recovering rights has never been an easy course. Paine died with little honor in the country he had helped to free from British rule, condemned as an "infidel" who had "done much harm." As his call to recover rights was published in 1792, James Madison expressed his concerns about the fate of the democratic experiment. He warned of "a real domination of the few under an apparent liberty of the many," deploring "the daring depravity of the times" as private powers "become the pretorian band of the government—at once its tools and its tyrant; bribed by its largesses, and overawing it by clamors and combinations." Thomas Jefferson feared the rise of a "single and splendid government of an aristocracy, founded on banking institutions, and moneyed incorporations" that would enable the few to be "riding and ruling over the plundered ploughman and beggared yeomanry." His thoughts were echoed by Alexis de Tocqueville, who perceived the dangers of a "permanent inequality of conditions" and an end to democracy if "the manufacturing aristocracy, which is growing up under our eyes,... one of the harshest that has ever existed in the world," should escape its confines. A century later, during a period not unlike today's, America's preeminent social philosopher, John Dewey, called for a recovery of basic rights to reverse the decline of democracy under the rule of "business for private profit through private control of banking, land, industry, reinforced by command of the press, press agents, and other means of publicity and propaganda," casting over society the shadow called "politics."

The vision of democracy that has inspired such concerns, and the popular struggles to advance the hopes and realize their promise, has been challenged in thought as well as deed. Madison's own attitudes towards democracy were ambivalent. During the Constitutional Convention, he urged that power should be vested in "the wealth of the nation," the "more capable set of men," who recognize that it is the responsibility of government "to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority." To perform this necessary task may be difficult, he anticipated, with the likely increase in "the proportion of those who will labor under all the hardships of life, and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings." Measures to combat their "leveling spirit" were basic principles of the constitutional order of which he was the leading framer. There should be no conflict with high principle, Madison believed, because the men of property who would hold power would be "pure and noble," each an "enlightened statesman" and "benevolent philosopher." Reality was harsher, as he soon came to appreciate. Hence his forebodings a few years later.

Similar illusions animated Wilsonian progressivism. Wilson's own view was that an elite of gentlemen with "elevated ideals" should govern in order to sustain "stability and righteousness." The intelligent minority of "responsible men" must control decision making, Walter Lippmann held. The dean of twentieth-century American journalism and a respected progressive democratic theorist, Lippmann was convinced that for democratic forms to function for the general welfare, public opinion must be shaped, and policy set and implemented, by this intelligent minority—self-designated, and owing their authority to their services to authentic power, a truism kept in the shadows by the elite intellectuals who find these ideas attractive. The general public, "ignorant and meddling outsiders," must "be put in its place," Lippmann added. Their place is remote from the centers of power. They are to be "spectators of action," not participants, though they do have a "function": The public is to act "only by aligning itself as the partisan of someone in a position to act executively," in periodic exercises called "elections." One of the founders of modern political science, Harold Lasswell, instructed the intelligent minority to be cognizant of the "ignorance and stupidity [of]...the masses" and to dismiss "democratic dogmatisms about men being the best judges of their own interests." They are not; we are. The masses must be controlled for their own good. As societies become more democratic, and force is no longer available as a means of social control, the "responsible men" must turn to "a whole new technique of control, largely through propaganda," he urged.

The ideal is what the academic democratic theorist Robert Dahl calls "polyarchy," not "democracy." Like Tom Paine, those who seek popular democracy "do much harm," according to prevailing elite doctrine.

Not surprisingly, the world of private power agrees. The modern public relations industry was strongly influenced by Wilsonian progressives who advocated "the engineering of consent," a technique of control employed by the responsible men for the benefit of their flock, the ignorant masses, whose minds must be "regimented" much as an army regiments their bodies. The stupid masses must be trained to abandon any dangerous and destructive ideas about controlling their own lives. Their task is to follow orders while focusing their attention "on the more superficial things that comprise much of fashionable consumption." They are to adopt a "philosophy of futility," business leaders explain, abandoning their fate to the gentlemen of "elevated ideals" who manage the political system, and to the concentrations of unaccountable private power that are the "tools and tyrants" of government. Their lives are to be restricted to a narrow private sphere, where consumption of commodities and individual wealth maximization are the reigning values. Much of the right-wing fervor behind the drive to destroy Social Security and public schools, and to block efficient and popular programs of public health care, reflects the understanding that such programs rely on values that must be extirpated: the natural and deep-seated values of sympathy and solidarity, the conviction that one should care about what happens to the child or disabled widow on the other side of town. These pernicious ideas must be driven from the mind. People must be atomized and separated if they are to be ruled by the responsible men, for their own good.

These conflicting visions are in constant tension, and there is considerable ebb and flow in the struggle to recover, sustain, and extend rights and freedom. Victories by the ignorant and meddling outsiders inspire fear, often panic, among business leaders, who warn of "the hazard facing industrialists in the rising political power of the masses" and call for increased vigor in "the everlasting battle for the minds of men." Liberal intellectual elites ponder the threat of the "excess of democracy" as normally passive and apathetic populations seek to enter the political arena to press their demands, forgetting their proper place in the democratic order. Deeply concerned by the "excess of democracy" of the 1960s, the Trilateral Commission intellectuals, representing liberal

internationalist sectors of the industrial world, urged "more moderation in democracy," perhaps even a return to the days when, according to Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, "Truman had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers." To reverse the excess of democracy, they advised, it will be necessary to overcome the failures of the institutions responsible for "the indoctrination of the young," perhaps even to institute government regulation of the press if its leaders do not impose "standards of professionalism," curtailing the occasional departures from orthodoxy and obedience.

The "crisis of democracy" perceived by the Trilateral analysts became more severe in the years that followed as large-scale popular movements developed from the ferment of the 1960s, interfering with elite control: feminist, environmental, solidarity, antinuclear, and others. These democratizing tendencies have been countered by important developments in domestic and international society. One fundamental element of the neoliberal programs of the last quarter-century is to restrict the public arena, undermining the threat of democracy by transferring decisions to unaccountable private tyrannies, under the slogan of "minimizing the state." The basic idea was captured by David Rockefeller, who founded the Trilateral Commission and shares its general liberal internationalist perspective. He expressed his approval of the trend towards

lessening the role of government, something business people tend to be in favor of. But the other side of that coin is that somebody has to take governments' place, and business seems to me to be a logical entity to do it. I think that too many business people simply haven't faced up to that, or they have said, "It's somebody else's responsibility; it's not mine."

Crucially, it is not the responsibility of the public.

The program of "minimizing the state" is nuanced, however: State functions are to be modified, not minimized. The state must at least continue to serve its "tools and tyrants," ensuring that the world is well-ordered for their needs, and at home, maintaining the traditional mechanisms for socializing cost and risk to protect "the minority of the opulent" from market discipline.

The financial liberalization that is a central component of neoliberal programs also undermines democracy, as has been well-understood for half a century. It creates what some international economists call a "virtual Senate" of investors and speculative capital, who hold "veto power" over governmental decisions and can punish "bad policies" that might benefit the population rather than improving the climate for business operations. Leaving nothing to chance, those who wage "the everlasting battle for the minds of men" have also established influential think tanks and other devices to constrain the limited public space allowed by corporate media. Consolidation of media and restriction of any public service function is a natural concomitant of these programs, quite apart from independent factors that are leading to oligopoly in many sectors of the economy, controlled by a small number of conglomerates linked to one another by strategic alliances and to the powerful states on which they rely, and over which they cast their shadow.

The public is aware of the growing "democratic deficit." One of the topics addressed below is the coverage—or perhaps "coverup" would be more apt—of the November 2000 elections in the corporate media. It is also worth noting that on the eve of the election, well before the Florida shenanigans and Supreme Court intervention, three-quarters of the population did not take the process very seriously, regarding it as a game played by financial contributors, party leaders, and the PR industry, which crafted candidates to say "almost anything to get themselves elected" so that one could believe

little they said even when it was intelligible. On most issues citizens could not identify the stands of the candidates, not because they are stupid or not trying, but because of conscious efforts to direct voter attention away from issues to "qualities." Many issues of great importance to the public could not even enter the electoral agenda because popular attitudes are so strongly opposed to the elite consensus: Among them are issues related to international economic affairs, including the "free trade agreements" that the business press, more honestly, terms "free investment agreements." Even a decade later, the position of the U.S. labor movement on NAFTA and the conforming conclusions of Congress's own research bureau have yet to be reported outside of dissident sources—for good reasons: They predicted rather well the harmful effects of these agreements on working people in the three countries concerned and proposed constructive alternatives. These might have received considerable popular support had they been made available, but are opposed by the elite consensus that sets the bounds for the electoral arena and media debate. A Harvard University project that monitors political attitudes found that at the time of the November 2000 elections, the "feeling of powerlessness has reached an alarming high," with more than half saying that people like us have little or no influence on what government does. The figures have risen steadily through the neoliberal period, not just in the United States but internationally, including Latin America, where the spread of formal democracy has been accompanied by a steady decline of faith in democracy.

Powerlessness need not translate into despair, however. As in the past, popular forces are organizing on a significant scale, highly decentralized in the familiar American style, with its weaknesses and strengths. McChesney and Nichols provide much evidence that we may be in "the early stages of a serious social movement," for which democratization of the media will be a central focus of discussion, activism, and reconstruction. They make a powerful case in support of these priorities, and suggest paths that can be followed to lay these foundations for recovering rights, and carrying forward the endless struggle for freedom and justice.

Introduction

"A popular Government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives."

—JAMES MADISON

It was supposed to be our media. In the age of enlightenment at the close of the eighteenth century, when thinkers began to imagine casting off the tyrannies of monarchs and inherited rather than elected governance, they understood that the essential tool of newly enfranchised citizens would be information. Thus, when James Madison and his comrades in the Revolutionary cause framed the Constitution of the new United States, they enshrined protections for a free and freewheeling, diverse and dangerous press that would serve as the foundation upon which American self-government and freedom would over the next two centuries be slowly—often painfully—built. There was never any question of original intent. "Our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press," warned Thomas Jefferson. The media was to serve as a stern watchdog over those in power and those who want to be in power, in both the public and private sectors. "The functionaries of every government have propensities to

command at will the liberty and property of their constituents," Jefferson explained. "There is no safe deposit for these but with the people themselves, nor can they be safe with them without information. Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe."

But is all safe? Does anyone seriously suggest any longer that the media provide all citizens with detailed accurate information and a range of informed opinions on the important issues of our times? Does anyone claim with credibility that the media is today the underpinning of America freedom and liberty? Would Jefferson and Madison see in the media monopolies of the twenty-first century the free press without which they knew there could be no democracy?

Of course not.

What was by design and necessity to have been our *media*—a brilliant blossoming of divergent, disagreeing and disagreeable voices, organized with the purpose of informing and convincing an electorate, arrayed in the service of that electorate and the democracy they would forge—has become *their media*. And much of what ails our democracy, our nation, and our world can be traced to this bastardization of the intentions of revolutionary democrats like Tom Paine. Paine dreamed of a nation that encouraged an "unceasing circulation of (ideas), which passing through its million channels, invigorates the whole mass of civilized man."

Far from invigorating the whole mass of us, the media system as it operates in the United States today fails to provide basic support for citizenship. It fails to protect or promulgate a public good. It is not a media system of our creation, by our hand or in our interest. That is because what we are subjected to today is not our media. It is their media.

Who are they? A handful of enormous conglomerates that have secured monopoly control of vast stretches of the media landscape. The oligopolistic structures they have created make a mockery of the traditional notion of a free press, where anyone can launch a medium and participate in the marketplace of ideas. And the monopolies grow ever more omnipresent with each passing year. Decades ago, A.J. Liebling wryly observed: "In America, freedom of the press is largely reserved for those who own one." We would update his line only by removing the word "largely."

Who does their media serve? They deliver first and foremost for their stockholders—major media in the United States can be enormously profitable. To maintain that profitability, they serve the major corporate interests that bankroll so much of the media with fat advertising checks. To avoid regulation in the public interest, they serve a political class that returns the favor by giving media conglomerates free access to the public's airwaves while routinely removing barriers to the expansion of corporate control over communications. To the extent that those who own major media in America today see themselves as being bound by public service duty, that duty is toward the affluent consumers who are served by round-the-clock business coverage that speaks to a tiny investor class.

The problem with their media system is that it exists to serve their interests, not ours. Profit trumps civil society every time. No wonder civil society is in crisis. Consider the diminution of basic values of community, service, and charity that we see as media-driven hypercommercialism pervades every nook and cranny of our culture. Consider the dramatic levels of disengagement that result when what passes for journalism leaves citizens uninformed. Consider the ugliness of elections in which serious coverage of the issues has been replaced by campaign ads chock full of the insulting lies and half-truths that have become the lingua franca of political discourse. Consider the way in which elected leaders—who are no longer chased after by a watchdog media—refuse any longer to address issues that vast majorities of Americans say require a governmental

response: access to health care, affordable housing, crumbling schools, inadequate transportation, a fouled environment, and a prison-industrial complex that locks away those who suffer from ailments that can and should be cured.

The argument is broadly made that we as citizens must take greater responsibility for advancing the public good and, certainly, there is a grain of truth in this view. But what about the media? Why don't more of us demand that the media display the level of responsibility that Madison and Jefferson intended?

The response that comes from apologists for major media usually suggests such questions are unpatriotic. After all, this theory goes, media conglomerates earned their success—and power—the American way: By winning the robust competition in the marketplace. This "free-market" defense of media has one flaw, however. It is not based in reality.

The claim that American media is the result of market competition won by a handful of multinational corporations is one of the Big Lies that media firms desperately propagate. Like a lot of their programming, it's a load of crap. Our media system is the direct result of government action— laws and regulatory policies—that established not just the playing field but the winners of the game. In the case of radio, television, cable, and satellite TV, governmental agencies grant monopoly rights to frequencies and/or franchises to private firms at no charge. Whoever gets these licenses is essentially guaranteed a profit. The value of this form of corporate welfare, over the past seventy years, is mind-boggling. It is certainly in the hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of dollars. Nearly all of our huge media giants today are built on the backs of this corporate welfare, though you would never know it by listening to their rhetoric.

Even films, music, and traditional print media depend upon government regulation for their existence. Copyright, which is a government sanctioned and enforced monopoly, is the foundation for most of these industries. Without this clear government intervention into the market to prevent competition, these industries would look radically different—not just to investors but to consumers. Or consider this: Tax codes that explicitly permit advertising to be written off as a legitimate business expense feed the commercialism that has overwhelmed media and society. And beyond writing tax codes that promote the commercial carpet-bombing of our homes, the government is itself a major purchaser of media content, and a major advertiser.

Put the pieces of the puzzle together and you will realize that there is nothing natural about media industries as they currently exist. They did not win an honest competition in the free market; they won a government lottery in which the overwhelming majority were denied the right even to buy tickets.

The battle is not between private media and government regulation. Today's private media system is the direct result of aggressive regulation and massive subsidies made by the government. The question is what will tomorrow's media system look like. And it will be answered as we decide the sort of regulation the government will provide—and in whose interest and according to what values that regulation will be asserted. Media corporations want more of the same: greater concentration of ownership, bigger monopolies, less responsibility to inform or enlighten and more profits. Most Americans, if they were given a choice, would opt for something different.

The problem in the United States is that, while regulatory policies have been and are being made in the public's name, they are not being made with the public's informed consent.

Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more corrupt example of corporate-government cooperation than what passes for communication "policy making" in Washington, DC. Huge corporate lobbies duke it out to get the best deals from politicians and regulators; all the while the commercial news media give the matter not

one bit of attention. The debate over the Telecommunications Act of 1996—a dramatic reshaping of media ownership rules and one of the most dramatic corporate welfare schemes in the nation's history—rated just one short story on an evening news broadcast. Indeed, the only place where you will find consistent coverage of media policy making in the -press is in business and trade publications, where it is framed as an issue for wealthy investors and executives. You will only rarely find media policy debates framed as issues of concern to consumers, and forget about a frame that considers media policy as an issue for citizens in a democracy. Most Americans are therefore entirely ignorant about the government policy making that shapes the media that we are all in contact with for the vast majority of our waking hours each day.

But don't we see commentators on Fox television complaining about the media? Doesn't Rush Limbaugh complain about the media on his nationally syndicated radio show?

Media criticism does exist in America. But by and large, it is not citizen-based criticism designed to make media a better source of information in a democracy. Instead, it is a cynical manipulation of the discourse designed to silence even the mildest dissent from the conservative, militantly pro-corporate dogma that has come to pass for news in an era when "reporters" brag about the size of their American-flag lapel pins.

No one should be surprised that the only form of media criticism that gets ample play in the commercial news media is criticism of corporate media for deferring—on rare occasions—to the pluralist values that most Americans embrace. Thus, we hear a lot about how the media has a left-wing or liberal political bias. The leading media feature prominent reviews and discussions of such claims—to such an extent that Bernard Goldberg's book *Bias* became a media-promoted bestseller about media bias. Readers of Goldberg's book discovered it was based on evidentiary standards so anecdotal, inconsistent, and paltry as to be pathetic. But those who tell us not to believe the liberal media have no qualms about appearing pathetic. They are on a mission.

When cable television commentators prattle on about liberal bias in the media without even acknowledging the irony of their circumstance, they do so not to win an ideological debate but to discredit any journalist who might still attempt to tell both sides of the story. The liberal-bias industry mushroomed during the Reagan years as a response to reporting on the president's foibles. As with media supporters of George W. Bush today, Reagan's backers did not want to have to address concerns about their man's competence so they suggested that any critical reporting was the result of liberal bias.

The truth, of course, is that there is no liberal bias in the media. World-class scholars, such as Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, have made substantial arguments about the media's structural bias toward the corporate and political status quo. Analysts with *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*, and scholars at dozens of journalism schools, have confirmed this critique in study after study. Yet while a Bernie Goldberg or Ann Coulter can march into any television study in America to screech about liberal bias that does not exist, Herman, Chomsky, and others who would offer a more rational critique are regarded by the media in much the same way that Soviet dissidents were by *Tass* or *Pravda*.

The bottom line: The corporate media are more than willing to entertain the idea that their main problem is that they are too critical of big business, the military, and people in power, and too sympathetic to the dispossessed. It reconfirms their self-image as some sort of feisty Fourth Estate. They are unwilling to even broach the idea that that they sit atop a system that was set up in a corrupt manner and that works to advance the interests of corporate American and limit democracy.

No wonder conspiracy theories are so popular in America; no wonder, when the makers of James Bond movies look for believable villains these days, they eschew Eurotrash bad guys for more credibly threatening villains such as the Rupert Murdoch-like media baron of 1997's *Tomorrow Never Dies*.

Don't get us wrong; we're not claiming there's a conspiracy. That gives the masters of corporate media and their servants in stations of political and regulatory power too much credit. Corporate media firms and trade associations do not even worry about subverting the popular will of a people they have effectively depoliticized with daily infusions of nonsense news about celebrity crimes and congressmen chasing interns. They could care less about their critics—on the left or the right. They are worried about making the most money possible. Thus, big media firms aim their lobbying arsenals not to block out the public, but simply to remove the few remaining barriers to their own expansion. The main fight the corporations and trade groups have in Washington, DC is with one another. But it is never about values, just money. The best way to understand how the big debates about media policy and regulation take place today is to recall a great film, *The Godfather, Part II*. One classic scene in the Oscar-winning 1974 picture depicts all the American gangsters sitting on the roof of a hotel in Havana carving up a cake shaped like Cuba. (The time period is the 1950s, back when the Mob ruled Cuba.) The gangsters each got a symbolic slice of the country. They would all jockey with each other for larger slices, but they agreed that only they were eligible to get a slice. It was their country.

The giants of corporate media engage in similar calculations and contrivances today, with similar results. Just as the mobsters of the 1950s could claim Cuba as their country, so the masters of the multinational firms that control communications in the United States can claim that it is *their media*. And it belongs to them because—as in Cuba, where the dictators deferred to the Mob—media policy decisions are made in contemporary America in deference to the demands of media conglomerates. The federal government has a cake shaped like the United States, or, increasingly, the globe, and the corporate communication giants are all fighting behind closed doors to get the largest slice. And they all agree that it is best for all of them if the public plays no role whatsoever in the process. There is an old axiom that "if you are not at the table, you are not part of the deal." That is what has taken place here. The system is set up for the benefit of the bottom lines of multinational media corporations, as opposed to the top line of democracy.

It is a rotten system, as corrupt and destructive as the one the mobsters constructed, and we—the citizens—must change it.

That's the point of this book. After many years of writing, arguing, and advocating against an increasingly undemocratic media, we are convinced that the time has come to build a movement that seeks to replace their media with a media that serves the great mass of Americans—*our media*. We know that it is mandatory that citizens blast open debates over media policy so that decisions that shape the media landscape are made not in secret, but with the *informed* public consent that our media system is supposed to be built upon. The ultimate objective of all our arguments is to open the way for the establishment of a more diverse and competitive media system, with a much larger nonprofit and noncommercial component.

We understand this is not an easy fight. The corporate media are powerful. They have world-class PR, and they have gotten very good at spinning the lie that they are "giving the people what they want." The struggle to remake media begins by spreading recognition that major media gives the people what they want only within the range that major media can maximize profits. So all sorts of things people clearly want—like less advertising and higher quality journalism—are not provided because they are not

profitable. When they think about it, Americans will fully understand that the existing market is not a flawless indicator of public desires, because it can only address what makes the most short-term profit for the media giants. That understanding opens the door for a renewed respect for the role that public policy making can and must play in shaping media systems that serve citizens.

The need to promote an understanding of the urgency to assert public control over the media system has never been greater. The problem has gotten so severe that the media system has become a major barrier to the exercise of democracy and to the discussion of any of the mounting social problems that face us. And there is no reason to think the media can self-correct; all the pressure is working against reform in the public interest.

Some will say, "But, hey, what about the Internet? Won't that break open the media system for us so that we do not need to worry about media policy making? Can't we just set up a Web site and go toe-to-toe with the media giants?" There is an element of truth to this claim—and the Internet is certainly changing a great deal about our lives. There is some extraordinary material online, but the Internet has yet to be proven successful as a platform to launch commercially viable competition to the media giants; again and again, the market trumps the democratic potential of the technology. This tends to marginalize dissident Web sites. And the Internet is hardly some autonomous force in society. Legislative, regulatory, and judicial determinations regarding copyright, antitrust, and access issues will decide exactly how progressive a medium it will become. In other words, if we want the Internet to deliver, we will need to craft policies addressing the broader issues of media reform in order to foster that prospect.

Even with the Internet, for instance, the damage done by the current media system to democracy in recent years has been dramatic. We do not use the word "damage" casually. It is our contention that a bottom-line obsessed, massively monopolized, and increasingly irresponsible media is no longer just unreliable. Their media are fostering our crises.

To give some sense of the scope of the problem, consider the three most important stories in recent memory—the dysfunctional election of 2000, the September 11 attacks and the ensuing War on Terrorism, and the revelation that American corporations have engaged in massive frauds against their employees, retirees, stockholders, and taxpayers. How has the media handled these tests of its mettle?

Since so much of focus here is on democracy, let's begin with the 2000 presidential election. Al Gore won the national popular vote by 600,000 votes. It is now clear that a plurality of the Floridians who went to the polls to cast ballots on November 7, 2000, intended to vote for Al Gore. Yet George W. Bush is president. What is important to understand is that he is president at least in part because major media spent much of November and December 2000 rushing to anoint Bush president rather than digging until they found out who actually won the election. If the media can't stop a stolen election, who can?

When the September 11 terrorist attacks struck, a select-ed-not-elected president began an assault on domestic civil liberties and a sweeping War on Terrorism that appears to have no endgame. The media should have met the president's power grabs with fierce skepticism as the track record of chief executives is clear: In nearly every major war the United States has fought over the past century, the administration in power has lied through its teeth to generate public support, because it feared the people would not approve of war were they told the truth. Yet the U.S. news media has been entirely compliant in supporting "America's New War," offering scarcely any hard interrogation of officials, the sort of interrogation that would be directed at the leader of any other nation that attempted to lead the planet into an ongoing, ill-defined, and

seemingly limitless war. As this has been proclaimed by President Bush as an endless war against evil-doers everywhere, one that will put us in a full war economy for a generation, this lack of criticism or rudimentary evaluation is a stunning abrogation of responsibility for a free press. When you add in the assaults on domestic civil liberties contained in Attorney General John Ashcroft's USA PATRIOT Act, and a penchant for secrecy on the part of the chief executive that would make Richard Nixon cringe, the media should be raising red flags on a daily basis. Instead, it is chirping along to the script provided by White House political director Karl Rove. No wonder serious international analysts compare U.S. media coverage of the war to that which might be expected in an authoritarian society where free press protections do not exist.

The U.S. media has done no better on stories that do not relate to September 11, the biggest of which has been the ongoing series of revelations about corporate corruption that began with the blowup of Enron. Arguably one of the greatest political scandals in a century, the Enron catastrophe is the direct—and predictable—result of what happens when massive corporations pay off politicians to get deregulation rulings that permit them to fleece workers, consumers, and taxpayers. The most striking feature of the Enron affair is how much of the company's sleazy activity was legal, and how most of the nation's political establishment—regardless of party or even ideology—was in bed with Enron swindlers. Revelations about Global Crossing, WorldCom, and other corporations reveals that Enron-style sleaze is rampant throughout industries that depend upon government regulation. It is safe to say that, in some industries, corruption is standard operating procedure. Yet the media, which are owned and operated by firms that rely on the same sort of cozy regulatory arrangements as did Enron, have converted these dramatic revelations into a business story and the political implications have fallen from view. There is every prospect that the problems that led to firms like Enron corrupting government policies will continue full steam ahead. The media have failed to fulfill a basic watchdog function, which means reform—even reform that is so obviously necessary—may be thwarted under cover of a (real| news blackout.

The report card on media is a dismal one. And-like any bad report card, it should be a call to action.

The failures of the media in recent years should underline for all of us the crises that arise—and go unaddressed—when media are more interested in being popular than in being accurate or useful. And it should drive home the demand that we, as citizens, must become media reform activists if we are serious about defending democracy.

This is not news to some Americans. As we travel the United States, we are struck by the extent to which ordinary Americans have recognized that it is no longer enough to complain about the media. Thousands of our fellow citizens have already begun to organize to change the media system. The growth of this media reform movement is one of the striking developments of the past decade; though, understandably, it has passed beneath the corporate news media radar. In the 1980s, for example, media critics did not even broach the idea of media reform as a serious issue; their goal was to help people understand the system so they could engage in self-defense. Even alternative media did not give the issue the time of day. Things are changing, however. Consider the following:

- Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, a media watch group formed in the late 1980s, has blossomed into a major high-quality source for media research and analysis.

- Progressive media like *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *In These Times*, and *Z Magazine* regularly report on media monopoly.

- Many national gatherings—from Media and Democracy gatherings to the recent Reclaim the Media Conference— have brought media activists together to discuss strategy and tactics.

- In cities like Baltimore, community groups have organized to get liquor billboards out of working-class and minority residential neighborhoods.

- Local "media watch" groups have developed in numerous cities, including Chicago, Denver, New York, and Seattle.

- Since 1999, Independent Media Centers (IMCs) have sprung up across the United States and the world. Internet-based IMC activists offer alternative journalism, covering stories that are ignored or mangled by the mainstream press. Criticism of corporate media has become a recurring theme for the IMCs – and the communities that have developed around them form a base of media activists.

- The group Commercial Alert is growing. It leads the fight against the spread of commercialism into every corner of our lives, especially in traditionally noncommercial public institutions like schools and museums.

- People for Better Television is growing. It leads the fight to make commercial broadcasters do public service in order to justify their monopoly licenses.

- Organizations like the Center for Digital Democracy have emerged to protect the Internet from corporate and commercial domination.

- An enormous grassroots organizing campaign in 1999 and 2000 led the FCC to begin opening the way for the licensing of approximately 1,000 new community-driven noncommercial "microradio" stations in open slots on the FM band.

- In 1998, 2000, and 2002, demonstrations took place at the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) headquarters and national convention, and in front of the FCC's headquarters in Washington, DC. The former were to protest the NAB's opposition to microradio noncommercial broadcasting; the latter was to protest the FCC's efforts to eliminate the few remaining regulations limiting the size of media corporations.

- In 2002, Representative Bernie Sanders (I-VT) introduced legislation to freeze second-class mailing costs for small, nonprofit publications that carry little advertising. The Independent Press Association, the trade association for small independent publications, organized a major lobbying campaign on its behalf. Sanders is also looking to propose additional legislation, and he is not the only member of Congress moving on this front.

We could go on and on. Almost everywhere one turns, media activism is evident. To the untrained eye one might think we were in the early stages of a serious social movement, perhaps even a revolution.

But the closer one looks, the more one sees the difficulties of organizing around media. Corporate lobbyists are paid to keep citizens out of the process, and they earn that money. Consider the fight over microradio. After the FCC announced a cautiously progressive policy in 2000, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), the trade association of commercial broadcasters, launched an aggressive counteroffensive to

derail it. The handful of huge corporations that dominate U.S. radio broadcasting did not want any competition for "their" listeners. (So much for the Big Lie that the media system is based on competition.) The profit-driven fear of the NAB was legitimate—if the bottom line is the bottom line. Were communities able to organize their own noncommercial local stations, the media giants have to compete and provide more local content and less commercials in order to keep listeners from migrating. So the NAB did what came naturally. It lied about the FCC plan to members of Congress, claiming that the new micro-stations would interfere with the existing stations. In fact, the FCC's cautious microradio engineering plan was taken from a plan that had been successfully developed by commercial broadcasters themselves in the early 1990s to put more stations on the air. Thus, when their profits were threatened, commercial broadcasters willingly sought to discredit their own research.

The lies being told about microradio were so blatant that even the NAB could not convince the Republican-controlled Senate to scrap the FCC plan. In the end, the NAB had one of its Congressional stooges add a rider to a budget bill in the middle of the night in December 2000 to block the FCC microradio plan. At first, Clinton vetoed the bill and openly disapproved of the rider gutting the microradio initiative. The budget bill was revised and sent back to Clinton again with the anti-microradio rider attached to it. As the bill was the product of arduous negotiations, President Clinton was of no mind to veto it. Microradio, as a viable alternative on the radio dial, was killed.

Should we read the microradio defeat as evidence that there is no hope for a media reform movement?

That's what the NAB would like. But it is not a rational response.

In fact, the microradio fight illustrates the enormous potential of a well-organized reform movement. Broadcasters and their lobbyists prevailed in the microradio battle only because they had the ability to flood members of Congress with lies that supporters of microradio lacked the resources to counter. A media reform movement may never have the financial resources of the NAB, but there are millions of Americans who know the media needs reforming and their numbers are growing. Like Saul Alinsky we believe that when you are fighting organized money, you need organized people. That is the demand—and the promise—of this book. We argue that Americans need to start taking media issues a lot more seriously if they want to shift the debate on all the issues they care about. We argue that groups that are already organized—trade unionists, feminists, religious groups, teachers, students, civil libertarians, farmers, environmentalists—need to put media reform on their agendas. And we argue that we need to do sustained outreach to the broad unorganized population to educate and mobilize on media reform. From our experiences giving hundreds of talks every year, we can tell you that the soil is fertile. But, as Midwesterners, we know that even in fertile soil seeds still must be planted and fields still must be plowed.

As progressives, we believe in the intrinsic desire of an informed citizenry to work together for a more egalitarian, humane, and sustainable world. We believe that most Americans, were we offered real information and real choices, would prefer to live in a truly democratic nation where political institutions respond to the people's needs, and where the economy is no longer warped by profit-obsessed monopolies. But real information and real choices are denied to most Americans by the current media regime. We want to change that media regime and, in this sense, our call is radical.

But the arguments we forward grow out of mainstream political values. We argue that if one takes the core values of constitutional democracy seriously, it is mandatory that there be informed public debate on media policy. This is Democracy 101. We are more than willing to live with the outcome of informed public debate as long as such debate exists. The more informed and democratic the policy debate, the better the

resulting policies. We are actually encouraged when we see the ends the corporate media go to prevent public involvement in communication policy making. It quickly becomes obvious that they fear what would happen if the American people understood how corrupt the process was. They recognize that an informed citizenry would never stand for the media status quo. On this point, we are in full agreement with them.

The only difference is that, while they fear democracy, we want democracy. That's why we are certain that the broad movement we propose will draw support from far beyond the outer boundaries of American progressive activism.

Because the fight we propose is first and foremost a struggle for democratic processes, the potential base of support includes everyone in the population who favors democracy over plutocracy. In short, the traditional distinctions of left and right are not decisive categories. The more accurate split is between up and down, those who benefit materially from the corrupt status quo, and those who do not. Even so-called political conservatives, especially those outside the beltway without million-dollar stock portfolios, dislike the way their children's brains are marinated in commercialism. They despise the corporate welfare that gives tens of billions of dollars worth of public property to corporations every year, and they no longer even participate in political campaigns based on idiotic thirty-second TV commercials. The core reform measures of the burgeoning media reform movement will speak to these Americans because they are all content neutral and viewpoint neutral. They do not call for censorship, nor do they propose the appointment of a Tom Ridge-style federal commissar to "educate" the masses. They call for blasting open the media system with more competition and more noncommercial and nonprofit voices. They call for establishing a genuinely pluralistic media system with a variety of institutions to provide culture, entertainment, and journalism. They seek to dilute the power of a handful of transnational conglomerates that put profit above all else and answer only to Wall Street, while empowering community voices that answer to Main Street.

This is a book with an agenda. We want to fan the flames of the movement for media reform that we believe is taking shape in the United States. In the first chapter, we spell out the problem in more detail. In the second chapter, we look abroad to explain how, as the U.S.-style, corrupt corporate media system becomes one of the central consequences of globalization, media reform is becoming an international issue. In some respects, the United States is a laggard in the global media reform movement and we have much to learn from studying other nations and working with them. In the final chapter, we return to the United States to discuss the burgeoning domestic media reform movement and the steps that must be taken to broaden its scope and power.

Throughout the book, we return frequently to the premise that democracy requires a truly free press. We are guided by the words of James Madison, who once argued that "all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error and oppression" were made possible by freedom of the press. We believe that a new era of triumphs by reason and humanity over error and oppression is in the offering. What is required to unleash it are the reforms that will give us our media, not theirs.

Chapter 1 The Problem of the U.S. Media

"The Founders didn't count on the rise of megamedia. They didn't count on huge private corporations that would own not only the means of journalism but also vast swaths of the territory that journalism should be covering."

—BILL MOYERS

"Experimenters have discovered that you can turn a cat into an alcoholic. The normal cat doesn't expect it, but keep adding vodka to the dish and the cat will soon demand spiked milk as an absolute necessity. The fat cats of the American mass media have lost their taste for the mother's milk of normal free enterprise: real competition for a reasonable profit. Thanks to addictive doses of sympathetic governmental policies and two decades of a drive for power, a shrinking number of large media corporations now regard monopoly, oligopoly, and historic levels of profit as not only normal, but as their earned right. In the process, the usual democratic expectation for the media— diversity of ownership and ideas—has disappeared as the goal of official policy and, worse, as a daily experience of a generation of American readers and viewers."

—BEN BAGDIKIAN

"Night after night audiences are terrified and titillated, aroused and manipulated, but not informed. Like an unbalanced diet, which gradually can lead to serious illness, the local TV news threatens the health of our community."

—PAUL KLITE, former executive director, *Rocky Mountain Media Watch*

It is imperative for Americans who care about democracy to come together and organize a mass movement for reform of the media system.

Two core observations bring us to this conclusion. The first is that the current media system is the direct result of explicit government policies, and that these policies have been made in a corrupt manner with minimal public participation. On this point there is virtually no debate.

Our second observation is that the existing media system in the United States operates in a manner that is highly detrimental to the requirements of a democratic and self-governing society. The system works to advance the interests of the wealthy few, rather than the many. This is a much more controversial argument, if only because it is an extraordinarily sensitive matter, going directly to the heart of how power operates in our society.

Yet as this chapter will illustrate, the case against the U.S. media system as it currently operates forms an overwhelming indictment.

Americans devour media at a staggering rate; in 2002, the average American spent almost twelve hours per day with some form of media. We are also in the midst of an unprecedented technological revolution—based around digital technologies, typified by the Internet—that looks to weave media and electronic communication into nearly every waking moment of our lives. In conventional parlance, these developments are presented as benign – they are, we are told, all about liberating individuals, investors, and consumers from the constraints of time and space while offering a cornucopia of

exciting new options and possibilities. This, however, is a superficial and misleading perspective on what is happening. Indeed, when one lifts the hood, so to speak, to see what is driving the media revolution, a very different picture emerges. The engine of change at this point is highly concentrated corporate power, which pulls the strings to dominate our existence so as to maximize return to shareholders. A secondary, yet no less significant purpose, is to protect the corporation's role—and corporate power in general—from being subjected to the public scrutiny and political debate it so richly deserves. This combination is a poison pill for democracy.

Yet in our American democracy the issue of media reform barely registers. The structures of our media, the concentration of its ownership, the role that it plays in shaping the lives of our children, in commercializing our culture, and in warping our elections, has been off-limits. When we examine the reality of media in the year 2002, however, it becomes clear that this circumstance must shift.

The argument for making media an issue can be found, above all, by surveying the contemporary media landscape. In 2002, the U.S. media system *is* dominated by about ten transnational conglomerates including Disney, AOL Time Warner, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi Universal, Sony, Liberty, Bertelsmann, AT&T-Comcast, and General Electric (NBC). Their media revenues range from roughly \$8 billion to \$35 billion per year. These firms tend to have holdings in numerous media sectors. AOL Time Warner, for example, ranks among the largest players in film production, recorded music, TV show production, cable TV channels, cable TV systems, book publishing, magazine publishing, and Internet service provision. This first tier owns all the commercial television networks, all the major Hollywood studios, four of the five firms that sell 90 percent of the music in the United States, a majority of the cable TV systems, all or part of most of the successful cable TV channels, and much, much, more. The great profit in media today comes from taking a movie or TV show and milking it for maximum return through spin-off books, CDs, video games, and merchandise. Hence it is virtually impossible to compete as a "stand-alone" movie studio, TV network, or music company, when one's competitors are part of vast empires. This has fueled the massive conglomeration rush of the past fifteen years.

Another twelve to fifteen firms, which do from \$2 or \$3 billion to \$8 billion dollars per year in business, round out the system. These firms—like Hearst, the New York Times Company, the Washington Post Company, Cox, Advance, Tribune Company, Gannett—tend to be less developed conglomerates, focusing on only two or three media sectors.

All in all, these two dozen or so firms control the overwhelming percentage of movies, TV shows, cable systems, cable channels, TV stations, radio stations, books, magazines, newspapers, billboards, music, and TV networks that constitute the media culture that occupies one-half of the average American's life. It is an extraordinary degree of economic and social power located in very few hands. The highly concentrated market makes a mockery of the freedom of press clause in the First Amendment, which was predicated on the ability of citizens to create their own media if they so desire. A person may have the "right" to launch a new movie studio or major daily newspaper, but, except in the rare circumstances of a handful of billionaires, it is a "right" in name only. "The history of survival of start-up newspapers in markets that already have at least one daily is not a happy one," a newspaper analyst commented in 2002. "In fact, there is no history. There has never been one survivor."

It has not always been this way. Much of this concentration has taken place in the past few decades, as technology and market imperatives made concentration and conglomeration far more attractive and necessary. Today it is impossible for the small, independent firm to be anything but a marginal player in the industries mentioned above. Most important, the flames of media concentration were fanned by a collapsing

commitment on the part of the federal government to serious antitrust prosecution, a diminution of the federal standards regarding fairness, and government "deregulation," most notably the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Congressional approval of the Telecommunications Act, after only a stilted and disengaged debate, was a historic turning point in media policy making in the United States, as it permitted a consolidation of media and communication ownership that had previously been unthinkable.

In 2002, a series of developments suggest that media concentration is becoming even more extreme. For decades, a few key FCC ownership regulations limited the ability of the media giants to expand. These included rules preventing the same company from owning TV stations and cable franchises in the same market, limiting the number of TV stations a single company could own, and restricting ownership of newspapers and TV stations in the same community. The FCC, under the leadership of President George W. Bush's appointed chair, Michael Powell, is expressly committed to decreasing or eliminating these and other limits on media monopoly—including the last barriers to a single corporation gaining dominance of print, broadcast, and cable communications in a single market. The multipronged strategy of the media giants also has a legal component. In 2002, the conglomerates won cases in the federal court system tossing key ownership regulations out as unconstitutional. Only if the FCC or Congress can make a better defense of them will the regulations be preserved.

The result of all this deregulation, should it proceed, will be an explosion of corporate deal making that will make the last decade of unprecedented media conglomeration look like a Wednesday night bingo game at the local old folks home. For the first time, media giants that have controlled TV station empires—Disney, News Corp., Viacom, General Electric—would be able to merge with or acquire media empires built on cable franchises, such as AOL Time Warner and AT&T-Comcast. As Blair Levin, a former FCC chief of staff, puts it, the ruling "allows for a powerful new entity we have never seen before—something that combines both cable and broadcasting assets." Include the ability to merge with the giant newspaper chains and you have a recipe for what Gene Kimmelman of the Consumers Union calls an "earth-shattering" shift in media ownership patterns. "The end result could be the most massive consolidation in media this nation has ever seen," says Kimmelman.

A surface survey of the statistics regarding media ownership, while deeply disturbing in what it reveals, fails to convey the full depth of the concentration of media ownership. Not only are media markets dominated by a handful of conglomerates with "barriers to entry," making it nearly impossible for newcomers to challenge their dominance, but they are also closely linked to each other in a manner that suggests almost a cartel-like arrangement. Some of the largest media firms own parts of the other giants; Liberty, for example, is the second largest shareholder in News Corporation and among the largest shareholders in AOL Time Warner. Moreover, the media giants employ equity joint ventures—where two competing firms share ownership in a single venture—to an extent unknown almost anywhere else in the economy. These joint ventures work to reduce competition, lower risk, and increase profits. By 2002, the nine largest media giants had an equity joint venture with six, on average, of the other eight giants; often a media giant would have multiple joint ventures with another firm. In sum, this is a tightly knit community of owners, dominated by some of the wealthiest individuals in the world. Indeed, thirteen of the hundred wealthiest individuals in the world—all of whom are worth over \$4 billion—are media magnates.

Such concentration of media ownership is clearly negative by any standard that cherishes free speech and diversity in democratic culture. But concentration in media ownership is not the sole cause of the problems with the media, and in some cases it is not a significant factor at all. Concentration is important to a large extent because it

magnifies the limitations of a commercial media system, and makes those limitations less susceptible to redress by the market. However, this sounds very abstract, so let's cut to the bone: The two main problems fostered by concentrated media are hypercommercialism and denigration of public service. These are really two sides of the same coin. As massive media corporations are better able to commercially saturate society, their ability or willingness to provide material with editorial and creative integrity declines. It is not that the individuals who run these firms are bad people; the problem is that the system of business in America is designed for profit making, not public interest, and thus we have a media system set up to enrich investors, not serve democracy.

No better example of how this process works can be found than in the U.S. radio industry. This was the one sector where ownership limits were explicitly deregulated by the 1996 Telecoms Act and what happened there should give a sense of where we are heading as ownership deregulation becomes the rule everywhere. Since deregulation of ownership in 1996, well over half of all U.S. stations have been sold. A few massive giants, owning hundreds of stations—as many as eight in each market—have come to dominate the industry. Six years ago, the law permitted a single firm to own no more than twenty-eight stations nationally; today Clear Channel alone owns some 1,200. As profits shoot through the roof, low-budget standardized fare has nearly eliminated the local content, character, and creativity that were once features of this relatively inexpensive electronic medium. Local news-gathering operations have been gutted, with many media groups now employing one announcer to read the "news" for as many as eight stations. "A huge wave of consolidation has turned music stations into cash cows that focus on narrow playlists aimed at squeezing the most revenue from the richest demographics," the trade publication *Variety* observed. "Truth be told, in this era of megamergers, there has never been a greater need for a little diversity on the dial."

The radio example points to the one other crucial group, aside from media owners, that gets treated with love and affection by corporate media executives: the corporate advertising community. Businesses spent over \$230 billion in the United States on advertising in 2001—some 2.4 percent of the GDP—and much of this money ended up in the hands of some media firm. Though journalists and civics teachers bristle at the notion, those media that depend upon advertising for the lion's share of their income—radio, TV, newspapers, magazines—are, in effect, part of the advertising industry. Throughout the 1990s, the media giants used their market power to bend over backward to make their media attractive to Madison Avenue and pummel customers with their ads. By 1999, the four major TV networks, for example, were providing nearly sixteen minutes per hour of commercials during prime time, an enormous increase from just a decade earlier, and the problem only grew worse in the years that followed. A conglomerate like Time Warner was able to sign a \$200 million advertising deal with General Motors that "crosses most of the entertainment company's divisions," so that "GM will have a first-look option on all automobile marketing opportunities within Warner Bros. operations." Not content with traditional advertising, media firms are now working on "virtual ads," whereby "a marketer's product can be seamlessly inserted into live or taped broadcasts." With ads so inserted during actual programs, viewers will be unable to avoid the commercials through *zapping*. Advertising has also been plugged into new venues, such as video games. But this does not capture the full spread of commercialism. In television, for example, the new growth area for revenues is selling merchandise that is shown on its programs. It barely caused a ripple when Tommy Hilfiger hired the Viacom-owned cable channel VH1, rather than an ad agency, to produce a series of TV ads, because VH1 is so effective at selling. In sum, the entire U.S. media experience increasingly resembles an infomercial.

Nowhere is the commercial marination of the American mind more apparent than in the case of children, where the advertising assault was increased exponentially in the 1990s. There are now four full-time cable channels (owned by the four largest U.S. media firms) bombarding children with commercial programming twenty-four hours per day. Advertisers have targeted the youth market as arguably the most important in the nation. Girls between the ages of seven and fourteen spend some \$24 billion per year and influence parental decisions worth another \$66 billion. Commercial indoctrination of children is crucial to corporate America. One study revealed that when eight-year-olds were shown two pictures of identical shoes, one with the Nike logo and the other with the Kmart logo, they liked both equally. The response of twelve-year-olds was "Kmart, are you kidding me?" This desire to indoctrinate fuels the commercial drive into education and suggests that the moral foundations for coming generations may be resting on a dubious base. Nobody knows what the exact consequence of this commercial blitzkrieg upon children will be, but, the range of debate extends from "pretty bad" to "absolutely terrible." The only thing we know for certain is that the media giants and advertisers who prosper from it do not care and cannot care. It is outside their frame of reference.

In this light, it is worth considering the status of the longstanding conflict between "church and state" in media,- this refers to the ability of journalists and creative workers to conduct their affairs without having output determined by what serves the immediate interests of advertisers, or owners for that matter. In conventional wisdom, the U.S. media system has been at its best when the divider between "church and state"—especially, though not exclusively, in journalism—has been pronounced and respected. That way media users can regard the articles and news and entertainment programs they read, see, and hear in the media as reflecting the best judgment of media workers, not the surreptitious bribe of a commercial interest. Nowhere has the collapse of editorial integrity been more pronounced than in magazine publishing. As the late Alexander Liberman, legendary editorial director of Conde Nast, noted in 1999, advertisers "have too much power. They determine, if not specifically, then generally what magazines are now." A series of scandals in the late 1990s affirmed what has been suspected: Advertisers have tremendous control over the editorial copy in U.S. magazines, and editors who are discomfited by this had best find employment elsewhere. "They're glitz bags," Norman Mailer said of magazines in 1999. "They are so obviously driven by the ads that the ads take prominence over the stories."

Hollywood films have so thoroughly embraced commercial values that *Variety* now writes of the "burgeoning sub-field of Product Placement Cinema." Conglomerate control of films and music has opened the floodgates to commercialism and has proven deadly for creativity. "A movie studio is part of this huge corporate cocoon," Peter Bart, editor of *Variety* and former head of Paramount, writes, "and therefore, theoretically, a studio should be willing to take bigger risks because one bad movie...won't erode the value of the [parent company's] shares. But the way it works out, the studios are if anything more risk averse. They are desperate to their bets. It's the nature of bureaucratic self-protection.... The pressure is reflected in the sort of movies that get made... the sort of pabulum that studios chewed on for ten years, that's gone through endless rewrites, has been pretested by endless focus groups, and is successful—if insipid." Or as an executive at Time Warner's "independent" studio New Line Pictures puts it, "We're very marketing-driven as a company. I'm instructed not to greenlight a project if I can't articulate how to sell it." As Bart concludes, this is "not exactly a recipe for art."

This said, we are not attempting to make a blanket indictment of everything produced by the corporate media system. We are not suggesting that every article or broadcast segment is foul, nor that they are all tainted, nor even that some material that is tainted cannot also be good. There are extremely talented people employed in the commercial

media system, and the pressure to satisfy audiences does indeed sometimes promote excellent fare. But corporate and commercial pressures greatly undermine the overall quality of the system and skew it in ways that are not at all the result of audience demand. In the world of corporate media, the key is to attract the preferred target audience while spending as little money as possible. In the battle for consumer attention, this strongly promotes a rehashing of tried-and-true formulae, as well as the use of sex, violence, and what is termed "shock" or "gross-out" fare. In a world where people are surrounded by innumerable media options (albeit owned by numerable firms), sex and violence are proven attention getters.

Corporate control and hypercommercialism are having what may be their most devastating effects in the realm of journalism, and as journalism is the oxygen of democracy, it is here that we must devote considerable attention. There is no need to romanticize the nature of U.S. professional journalism from the middle of the century into the 1980s; in many respects it was deeply flawed. Yet whatever autonomy and integrity journalism enjoyed during the era of Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein, and *Lou Grant* is now under sustained and unyielding attack by corporate owners in the hunt for profit. No more striking evidence for this exists than the results of a 1999 Pew Research Center poll of journalists concerning their profession. Until the 1990s, journalists tended to be stalwart defenders of the media system, and most scholarship emphasized journalists' hypersensitivity to criticism of their field. No more. The Pew poll found that "at both the local and national level, majorities of working journalists say the increased bottom-line pressure is hurting the quality of coverage." "This past year," David Halberstam wrote in 1999, "has been, I think, the worst year for American journalism since I entered the profession forty-four years ago." Bob Woodward, the Watergate investigator who has enjoyed one of the most successful and prestigious media careers of the era, says that in these days of hyper-commercialism and hypercompetition, "No one is the keeper of the conscience of journalism."

The brave new world of corporate journalism manifests itself in many ways. The primary effects of tightened corporate control are a serious reduction in staff, combined with pressure to do vastly less expensive and less controversial lifestyle and feature stories. Where there is "news," it often takes the form of canned crime reports that foster unrealistic and unnecessary fears. This is the magic elixir for the bottom line. Sometimes the new world of corporate journalism is typified by blatant corporate censorship of stories that might hurt the image of the media owner. But the maniacal media baron as portrayed in James Bond films or profiles of Rupert Murdoch is far less a danger than the cautious and compromised editor who seeks to "balance" a responsibility to readers or viewers with a duty to serve his boss and the advertisers. In media today, even among journalists who entered the field for the noblest of reasons, there is an internalized bias to simply shy away from controversial journalism that might enmesh a media firm in a battle with powerful corporations or government agencies. True, such conflicts have always been the stuff of great journalism, but they can make for very bad business, and in the current climate business trumps journalism just about every time.

During the 2000 presidential race, for instance, major television stations argued against what one might think would be their own self interest. In their moves to exclude Green Party candidate Ralph Nader from three presidential debates, they guaranteed that controversial issues involving corporate power—including media conglomeration—would not be raised. Yet the exclusion of Nader also guaranteed that the debates would become duller-than-dirt agreeathons in which Al Gore and George W. Bush essentially invited viewers to turn off their televisions.

The most common and noticeable effect of the corporate noose on journalism is that it simply allows commercial values to redirect journalism to its most profitable position.

As a result, relatively vast resources are deployed for news pitched at a narrow business class, and suited to their needs and prejudices,- such news has come to dominate newspapers, specialty magazines, and cable television. Likewise, news for the masses increasingly consists of stories about celebrities, royal families, athletes, natural disasters, plane crashes, and train wrecks. Political coverage is limited to regurgitating what some politician says, and "good" journalism is practiced when a politician from the other side of the aisle is given a chance to respond. During the Florida recount following the 2000 election, television networks featured nightly food fights between backers of Gore and Bush, but left the real reporting on disenfranchisement of minority voters, structural flaws in the voting systems, and corrupt practices within the offices of Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Secretary of State Katherine Harris to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other foreign broadcasters.

The approach to "reporting" practiced by America's corporate media today is not journalism; it is stenography. Perhaps the strongest indictment of corporate journalism is that the preponderance of it would be compatible with an authoritarian political regime. So it is that China has few qualms about letting most commercial news from the United States inside its borders; it can see that this low caliber of journalism is hardly a threat to its rule. It is the BBC, with its regrettable penchant for covering politics seriously, that draws the commissar's ire.

There is also intense pressure for journalism to contribute immediately and directly to the bottom line. One Tennessee TV station received adverse publicity for offering to do TV news "puff pieces" on local businesses in exchange for \$15,000 payments. It is important to note, however, that the mistake made by that Tennessee station was not the spirit of the offer—it well reflects the pattern across the news media—but rather the baldness of it. Firms also use the news to hype their other programming, as in 1996 when *NBC Nightly News* made the Summer Olympics its most covered news story that year, even though none of the other networks had the Olympics ranked on their top-ten lists. Why? Because NEC was airing the Olympics that summer—and reaping the attendant financial rewards. The fall of 1999 saw a huge debate erupt in newspaper circles after the *Los Angeles Times* devoted the entire editorial space in an edition of its 164-page Sunday magazine to articles, photos, and graphics describing downtown Los Angeles' new Staples Center sports arena. The newspaper did not reveal at the time of the magazine's publication, however, that it would be dividing the \$2 million in revenues generated by the section with the owners of the arena. So dark was the scenario that the former publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, Otis Chandler, sent a letter to the staff describing the new management's move as "unbelievably stupid and unprofessional."

Above all, however, the *Los Angeles Times* was blatant. It allowed the corrupting linkage between advertisers and the media to be clearly identified. More often than not, a measure of subtlety keeps controversies under wraps.

All told, this creates a crisis for democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville rightly celebrated the role that a free and diverse media plays not only in greasing the wheels of electoral systems but in maintaining the very structures of civil society. The nineteenth-century surveyor of the American public landscape went so far as to say of news organizations, "They maintain civilization." Who would seriously attempt to make such a statement about media in an era of round-the-clock Gary Condit coverage?

The current caliber of journalism is decidedly unsatisfactory for a democratic society. Democratic journalism should provide a ruthless accounting of the powers-that-be and the powers-that-want-to-be, both in government and politics and in the extremely powerful corporate sector. Democratic journalism should also provide background information and a full range of viewpoints on the main social and political issues of the day. We cannot expect each news medium to provide all of these elements of a quality

journalism, but in combination, a democratic media system should make this caliber of journalism readily available to the entire population. It may be true that the media are not entirely responsible for the apathy, cynicism, and depoliticization that mark U.S. electoral politics today; in fact, media executives sometimes use this lack of interest in politics to justify their declining attention to public affairs and their continuing coverage of trivial and mindless stories. However, it is also true that the lack of journalism has fanned the flames of depoliticization and contributed to U.S. electoral politics becoming a commercial contest sponsored by a small group of billionaires, in which most Americans rationally assume they have no role to play, or stake in the outcome. Presidential elections now draw, at best, no more than half of the electorate to the polls. They have become media entertainments, complete with graphics and play-by-play reports but bereft of any suggestion that citizens should—or could—actually play any more of a role in this extravaganza than they do in the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards.

Not only is political coverage in American media increasingly empty and meaningless, there is also less and less of it. Indeed, while the amount of air time allotted the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards has increased in recent years—as prices paid for properly placed advertising skyrockets—coverage of the most fundamental workings of our democracy is getting squeezed. And without apology. Asked by the *Dallas Morning News* about slackening coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign by America's television networks, former ABC White House correspondent Sam Donaldson answered, "We are doing a very minimal amount of coverage at ABC. Outside of *Nightline* and our Sunday show, ABC News, in my opinion, has simply forfeited the field." Let's not pick on ABC, however; all the broadcast networks are cutting back, according to the watchdog group Alliance for Better Campaigns. During the 2000 presidential primary season, the Alliance reported, the networks were giving the presidential campaign 20 percent less coverage than they did in 1988—the last time the U.S. saw serious contests for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations. Ex-CNN president Rick Kaplan told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that the major broadcast networks had been "derelict" in their coverage of the 2000 campaign. "They're making their news divisions less important than they were. They're just getting out."

To be fair and accurate, journalism is flawed not merely due to corporate pressures to generate profits or to satisfy the political desires of the owners; the problem goes deeper than that. Much of the problem with contemporary journalism is due to the codes of professional journalism that emerged a century ago, and that remain of paramount importance in understanding journalism today. Professional journalism was a revolutionary break with the idea that the journalism of a medium—usually a newspaper at that time—would and should invariably reflect the political viewpoints of the owner. Partisan journalism, the bread and butter of Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln, could only be defended in an environment where there were competitive markets, and a wide range of opinion. In the highly concentrated newspaper markets that emerged by the twentieth century, partisan journalism appeared more like uncontested propaganda than anything else. In this environment, the large newspaper publishers pushed for professionalism. Their journalists would all be trained to be nonpartisan so the matter of who owned all the media and the lack of market competition were now irrelevant. As research has shown repeatedly, however, the professional code "smuggled in" the political biases of the owners, but made them now appear as nonpartisan, even objective truth.

With this in mind, let us return to the three great news stories of recent times that we mentioned in the introduction, each of which goes to the heart of a core democratic function of the free press. The first, the 2000 presidential election, was about whether the American people could hold a fair election for the highest office in the land. The second, the War on Terrorism, concerns how this nation arrives at the most important

decision any society can make: to enter and conduct a world war with no end in sight. The third, the revelation of Enron's ability to squeeze billions from taxpayers, workers, and consumers by buying off politicians right and left for its dubious deregulation schemes, speaks to the ability of journalism to hold government—and the firms it regulates—accountable for corruption.

Let's start with the War on Terrorism. When a democracy considers whether to engage in war, the free flow of information is of dramatic significance: How can parents decide that they favor sending their sons and daughters off to fight when they lack adequate information about the causes, goals, and strategies of the proposed fight? How can citizens decide whether it is appropriate to reorder national economic priorities in order to fund an ongoing "War on Terror" when they do not even know the targets of that war? From World War I to Korea and Vietnam, presidents have lied to the American people because they believed that if the American people knew the truth, they would not support the move for war. The track record of the U.S. news media in the twentieth century is one of regularly going along with fraudulent efforts to get the nation into one war or another by the administration in power. These are considered the dark moments in the history of U.S. journalism. What is most striking in the U.S. news coverage following the September 11 attacks is how it followed this lamentable pattern. The most essential debate—the one about whether to go to war—never really occurred in Congress or the media. Tough questions were ignored. Why should we have believed that a militarized approach would be effective? Why was the United States entitled to determine—as judge, jury, and executioner—who is a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer in this global war? What about international law?

Most conspicuous was the complete absence of comment on one of the most striking features of the war campaign—something that any credible journalist would be quick to observe were the events taking place in Russia or China or Pakistan. There are very powerful interests in the United States that greatly benefit politically and economically by the establishment of an unchecked war on terrorism. This consortium of interests can be called, to use President Eisenhower's term, the military-industrial complex. It blossomed during the Cold War when the fear of Soviet imperialism—real or alleged—justified its creation and expansion. A nation with a historically small military now had a permanent war economy, and powerful special interests—private-sector defense contractors chief among them—that benefited by its existence.

For journalists to raise issues like these did not presuppose that they opposed government policies, merely that the policies needed to be justified and explained, so the support would be substantive, not ephemeral, the result of deliberation, not manipulation. Such has not been the case. Much of mainstream U.S. journalism was bluntly propagandistic in the weeks and months following September 11. As a result, most Americans supported a war, even though they knew next to nothing about the region where U.S. soldiers would be fighting, the historical context of the battles, or the role that past military adventurism might have played in stoking the resentments that feed international anger at the United States.

It is important to be clear about why the coverage has been so deplorable. It is not directly due to concentrated media ownership, or meddling CEOs, although the very firms that are now saluting "America's New War" are also going before the Bush Administration asking for ownership deregulation that will make all of them much larger and more profitable. The main reason for this distorted coverage is due to the way in which so-called "professional" journalism is practiced in the United States. To avoid the taint of partisanship, and to keep costs low, professionalism makes official or credentialed sources the basis for news stories. Reporters report what people in power say, and what they debate. This gives the news an establishment bias. Even when there

is disagreement, the range of debate extends only as far as does the disagreement of those with a vested interest in limiting the scope of the discourse.

When a journalist reports what official sources are saying, or debating, she is considered "professional." When she steps outside this range of official debate to provide alternative perspectives or to raise issues those in power prefer not to discuss, she is no longer considered "professional."

In matters of international politics, "official sources" are almost interchangeable with the term "elites," as foreign policy is mostly a preserve of a wealthy and powerful few—C. Wright Mills's classic power elite. At its worst, in a case like the current war on terrorism, where the elites and official sources are unified on the core issues, the nature of our press coverage is uncomfortably close to that found in authoritarian societies with limited formal press freedom.

Many working journalists would recoil at that statement. Their response would be that professional reliance on official sources is justifiable as "democratic" because the official sources are accountable to people who are elected by the citizenry. The problem with this rationale is that it forgets a critical assumption of free press theory: Even leaders determined by election need a rigorous monitoring, the range of which cannot be determined solely by their elected opposition. Otherwise the citizenry has no way out of the status quo, no capacity to criticize or advance the political culture as a whole. If such a watchdog function grows lax, corruption invariably increases, and the electoral system decays. If journalism that goes outside the range of elite opinion is dismissed as unprofessional or partisan—and, therefore, justifiably ignored—the media merely lock in a corrupt status quo and can offer no way out. If journalists must have official sources on their side to pursue a story, it gives people in power a massive veto power over the exercise of democracy.

This problem becomes acute in a political environment like the United States, where electoral laws and campaign costs have made politics a fiefdom for the superwealthy and those who represent the superwealthy. Over ninety percent of the "hard money" contributions to congressional and presidential campaigns come from the wealthiest one percent of Americans. By relying on official sources, our journalism does not pose a democratic challenge to plutocracy, but rather cements the plutocracy in place.

But the best example of the plutocracy protection principle that now defines U.S. journalism is the Enron scandal that unfolded in late 2001 and 2002. The story of Enron's collapse was shocking only because, although evidence of Enron's shady operations had been cropping up since at least the mid-1990s, the rah-rah corporate journalists of our era were falling all over themselves to praise Enron as the exemplar of the New Economy. Enron was regularly featured on *Global Finance* magazine's annual list of the "world's best global companies." Even as the collapse of Enron approached, *Fortune* magazine hailed the corporation as its "most innovative company in America."

Only when the company approached bankruptcy did it rate as anything akin to a news story—and not much of a news story at that. The corporate media had special incentive not to push the Enron story too far. Were discussion of Enron and energy policies to lead to any sustained examination of the way communication policies are produced behind closed doors in Washington—arguably the most off-limits story in U.S. journalism in our times—it would find a thick stench that would rival anything Enron has done. But that wasn't the whole of why the media missed the real story.

Although it is clear that the Enron affair is a stunning example of supreme political corruption, the coverage increasingly came to concentrate upon the business collapse of Enron, and the chicanery of Arthur Andersen, rather than the sleazy methods, legal as well as illegal, in which the company used the political system to make billions of dollars ripping off consumers, taxpayers, and workers. In another era, the Enron collapse would

have been provoked a bigger political crisis than the Teapot Dome scandal, which shook the presidency of Warren Harding and forced dramatic action by Congress. Still, all indications are that the Enron scandal will not turn into a political crisis that will end political careers and lead to major political reform.; the opposition Democrats are in no hurry to push the story to its logical political conclusion because so many of them would be implicated as well. Thus, there is no debate among official sources about the proper response to the political corruption issues raised by the Enron case. Without those officials sources, "professional" journalism is restricted to a discussion that begins and ends within the limits of what those in power pursue, and the balance of the population has no one representing its interests. What about those who simply want the whole truth to come out? What about those who want the system changed so this sort of corruption is less likely to occur in the future? They are out of luck. This is disastrous for liberal democracy, as it suggests to citizens that even dramatic revelations of corporate and political corruption will not lead to change. If the press system cannot produce coverage that leads to peaceful and credible reform of corruption, it only means the problems will get worse and the costs of an eventual resolution significantly greater.

Finally, consider the manner in which the press reported President Bush's "victory" in the 2000 election. It is now clear that the majority of people in Florida who went to vote for president in November 2000 intended to vote for Al Gore. Indeed, buried in the footnotes of a recount conducted by the major news media in 2001 was the revelation that using any method that sought to quantify the actual sentiments of the actual voters the result was the same: Al Gore won Florida. And winning Florida was supposed to cinch the presidency. But Al Gore isn't president. Why is that? Or, to put it another way, why didn't the press coverage assure that the true winner would assume office? After all, if the free press cannot guarantee the integrity of elections, what good is it? The primary reason is due to sourcing: Throughout November and early December of 2000, the news media were being told by all Republicans that the Republicans had won the election and Al Gore was trying to steal it. The Democrats, on the other hand, were far less antagonistic and showed much less enthusiasm to fight for what they had won. Hence, the news coverage, reflecting what their sources were telling them, tended to reflect the idea that the Republicans had won and the Democrats were grasping for straws. When Greg Palast broke the story in Britain in November 2000 that the Florida Republicans had systematically and illegally excluded thousands of poor Floridians from voting—in itself, certainly enough to cost Gore the state—no U.S. mainstream news medium dared pick it up, even though the story was painstakingly well documented. Why? Most likely because journalists would have been out on their own, since the Democrats had elected not to fight on this issue. Once the Supreme Court made its final decision, the media announced that our national nightmare was over—neglecting to note that, according to most polls, Americans would have been perfectly willing to have the process go on in order to identify a clear winner. The media had helped anoint a president. The only losers were the irrelevant and powerless souls who clung to the belief that whoever gets the most votes should win the election, and that the press should tell the whole truth and let the chips fall where they may.

Having played the role that it did in picking the president, the media was in no position to criticize the Bush Administration. This explains at least some of the willingness of the mainstream U.S. news media to suspend criticism of President Bush almost *in toto* after September 11. Having foisted the moronic child of privilege upon the American people, it became necessary in a moment of national anguish to remake him as another Lincoln, albeit one who preferred lifting weights to reading books.

When the recount report containing data that seemed to confirm that Gore had won Florida was released two months after September 11, what was striking was how almost

all the press reported that the results were mixed or that Bush had won. Major newspapers and television networks reached this "conclusion" only through the Olympic-style gymnastic twist of analyzing the data from the standpoint of what the Gore campaign had requested in November of the year before. The identity of the actual winner of the actual election in Florida—i.e., the person who most of the voters preferred—seemed not to interest the press one whit. In a manner of thinking, the press had no choice but to provide this interpretation. If the media conceded that Gore, in fact, had won the race in Florida, it would have made people logically ask, "why didn't the media determine this when it mattered?" Moreover, a concession that the United States had an unelected president would make the laudatory coverage of President Bush after September 11 look increasingly like the sort of paeans to "maximum leaders" expected from the news media in tinhorn dictatorships. As soon as the leaders are not the product of free and fair elections, they lose credibility; with that development, the "professional" reliance on official sources, which is wobbly by democratic standards to begin with, collapses.

In years past this criticism of the U.S. media would have been met by howls of indignation from journalists, professors, and citizens of every stripe. Ours was a truly free press, they would argue, celebrating the majesty of the freedom in American history. Today that response is muted; the asininity and degradation of our media culture is palpable and hard to digest even for the old true believers. Or, perhaps, especially for the old true believers who have seen their faith in what good the media might do erased by the reality of what it does. Yet the system still has many who defend it, albeit with less enthusiasm and righteous fervor than in years gone by. One defense is that the media system is based on the pursuit of profit, so firms are compelled to "give the people what they want," or face economic ruin. There is an element of truth to this claim, but it should not be exaggerated. Media markets are hardly competitive in an economic sense, and because of that firms have a great deal more power to force people to choose from what they deem most profitable. Moreover, media markets often are set up with advertisers, not people, as the primary partner; in such cases the needs of the citizenry fade from view beneath the commercial imperatives of Madison Avenue. This is especially true in the newspaper industry, where the drive to attract affluent readers has led in many cities to a radical decline in serious coverage of poor and working-class neighborhoods as resources are shifted to the coverage of suburban areas where the readers that advertisers want tend to congregate. Moreover, even a purely competitive market media system, and one without any advertising, would be far from perfect. Markets are predicated upon one dollar, one vote, rather than one person, one vote. Hence, rich individuals have many more votes than people who are poor. The market in this sense is more plutocratic than democratic. While the market can play an important role in a democratic media system, it should never comprise the entirety of a democratic media system.

Another defense of the existing order is that this is the "natural" American system; if someone is dissatisfied with it, that person should shut up or move to another country, preferably on the other side of the world. The "love-it-or-leave-it" theory, aggressively advanced by the likes of millionaire radio personality Rush Limbaugh, holds that the First Amendment has authorized two dozen profit-seeking transnational corporations to rule U.S. media with ample government subsidies but with no public "interference" otherwise. This is an argument that does not stand up to any historical scrutiny. It is true that the First Amendment prohibits congressional interference with a free press – however, it does not therefore authorize concentrated corporate and advertiser domination of the press. Imagine a parallel phenomenon in the practice of religion: If a handful of faiths were using their accumulated resources and their lobbying influence with government to

gain dominance in the spiritual life of the land while forcing faiths with different ideas and values out of the public sphere, would First Amendment absolutists argue that this was the intent of the "freedom of religion" protection? If they tried to do so, they would be stymied by the courts, laughed out of any serious debate, and appropriately labeled as self-serving theocratic totalitarians.

The First Amendment belongs to all Americans, not just the billionaire investors in a handful of giant media firms, and it is based on the notion that democracy demands a press that serves us all. We are not arguing for government censorship of the commercial media—in fact, we oppose efforts in that direction—but we think efforts to reduce the power of Wall Street and Madison Avenue, and to increase the role of Main Street and every other sector of the population, in the running of our media system are entirely consistent with the meaning of the First Amendment.

Some also defend the status quo by asserting that the corporate media do not have much effect upon anyone, - thus, complaints such as the ones we have raised amount to much ado about nothing. This perspective holds that media consumers are savvy in the ways of the media, and can interpret commercial messages critically. It's true that few citizens swallow everything the media dish out. In the old Soviet Union, few citizens believed what they read in *Pravda* or *Izvestia*, but that didn't mean the society would not have been well-served by massive reform of the media system. And to suggest that the corporate media have no effect upon us seems to be untenable; after all, there are limits to how far we can expect citizens to "read into" media messages. Nor do we suggest that all that media produces should be met with deep skepticism; we recognize that the system offers much material that is useful and entertaining. Our claim is simply that the media system produces vastly less of quality than it would if corporate and commercial pressures were lessened.

There is one new argument in defense of the media status quo, the argument that the Internet will set us free. Ironically, it seems that the same people—like George Gilder—who just a few years ago were telling us how great the media system was in the United States are now suddenly conceding that it is, indeed, dreadful, but that there is no reason for concern. The Internet, they tell us, allows us to escape this failed media landscape. How? The theory goes something like this: Because anyone can start a Web site at a relatively nominal expense, and because anyone online can access any Web site, then the giant media firms are dinosaurs from another age, and their monopolistic control will be doomed once the Internet comet fully smashes into the earth. Happy days are here again. Heaven on earth. Digital nirvana. And all we have to do is sit back, wrap our mitts around our mouse, and let the private sector do its thing. It doesn't get any easier or better than that, does it?

As with the other defenses of the media status quo, there is an important element of truth, or half-truth, in this euphoric vision of the Internet as a magical democratizing technology. The Internet, and digital communication more broadly, are radically changing our lives. In a few years, the world we live in is going to look quite different from the world of just a few years ago. Moreover, the Internet is forcing a reconfiguration of the media industries, as the shift to digital communication means that the traditional distinctions between media and even communication sectors are disappearing. Nevertheless, the hope that the Internet is going to overturn the media system and open up unlimited space for new voices—not to mention marginal, dissident, or noncommercial voices—has been proven to be unfounded. In particular, many of the Utopian visions of what the Internet might do have clashed with the reality of the digital divide between "wired" CEOs and millions of impoverished Americans who lack access to telephone lines, computers, and all the other "tools" needed to ride the Internet highway. This hardly means that there will not be exciting and important use of the

Internet by activist and noncommercial interests—nor that, with concerted effort, the divide between Internet haves and have-nots might be closed. What it does mean, rather, is that the Internet—ruled by commercial values—has already been turned to purposes far less noble than those imagined by digital Utopians.

The core problem with the "Internet will set us free" argument was that it mistook the existing power of the media giants as being based on technology, when in fact that power is also based on the market. While it is true that anyone can start a Web site, it has proven nearly impossible for anyone to start a commercially viable Web site unless they are owned by or affiliated with an existing media giant. The evidence suggests that the Internet was going to enhance concentration among media firms, as well as their overall size. One survey found that far from being "a democratizing force, allowing a large number of relatively equal market contestants to compete on a level playing field," the Internet instead gives the dominant sites "an accelerating advantage over their competitors." Even Microsoft, with its billions of dollars in hard cash, effectively abandoned producing content for the Internet after squandering a few hundred million dollars on the endeavor in the late 1990s.

The explanation is simple: the media giants have several tremendous advantages as they colonize the Internet. They have existing digital programming to put on the Web, while it is exceedingly expensive for new competitors to produce such fare. The giants can bring advertisers over to their Web sites as part of their contracts with their traditional media. They can heavily publicize their Web activities over their traditional media, in a manner that would be cost prohibitive for any Internet media start-up that did not have a traditional media outlet. The media giants also have tremendous leverage with Internet service providers, search engines, and portals to get premier position on the screen. And, to top it off, the media giants have invested heavily in Internet content ventures to keep a finger in the pie. The media firms know that their ultimate survival depends upon their dominating cyberspace, so they are willing to assume losses there far longer than would any rational investor without other media holdings. In combination, these factors are overwhelming. Moreover, as cyberspace is colonized by the media giants, it appears to be fanning the flames of hypercommercialism inherent in the traditional media system. Media Web sites often feature e-commerce as a means of generating revenues, and to attract advertisers, the crumbling notion of editorial integrity from commercial pressure has been compromised even further.

And where does this leave us? Facing more concentrated media ownership than ever; deteriorating standards of journalism – hypercommercialized culture and entertainment; a declining civic life in a shrinking democracy; and slim hope on the Internet. Depressing, no?

And that's not the half of it. The system seems almost impervious to change. Consider how powerful the media and communication lobbies are in Washington, DC, as they routinely use the campaign contribution scalpel to remove politicians' backbones. By virtually every measure, the corporate media, telecommunications, and computer lobbies, and trade associations are among the most powerful in the nation. The corporate media not only have piles of money but also control access to the public, something that politicians covet. One of the favorite lobbying techniques of the NAB and other big-media advocacy groups is to bring local station managers to Washington to meet with members of Congress. Imagine the effect of sitting a congressman down with the person who has the power to decide whether his face ever again graces television screens in his hometown. Talk about influence! And that's just the beginning. In 1999, the NAB went so far as to use the wives of members of Congress in their televised public service announcements. As one report noted, "It is a quiet way of further ingratiating itself with lawmakers." Finally, the corporate media are in the position of

being able to provide the press coverage of any debates over media policy and hence define what the public will be exposed to on the issues. This trump card ought to make the corporate media the envy of the business community.

The purpose of this book is to not to wallow in how bad things are getting, but to begin exploring how to reverse the trend with workable strategies for activism, organizing, and direct action. So long as this is a legitimate democracy, things do not have to be this way, and we have the power to both change the system—and build independent alternatives to it. Public policy could effectively restructure our media system such that it has a significant and viable nonprofit and noncommercial component. Once media is made a bona fide political issue, as soon as it is "in play," the forces favoring media reform will prevail. We may not democratize it completely, but we will advance. (That is why the media giants work so incessantly to ensure that media issues never see the light of day.) So getting media reform on the public agenda is the first and greatest obstacle we face. And here we run up against the ultimate defense of the media status quo, after all the other arguments have been discredited. This is the notion that there is simply no other way for media to be operated in a democratic society, so it is not even an issue worth considering. This line of analysis tells us that any change from the status quo must be, by definition, a change for the worse. This is a powerful and paralyzing notion, and it carries considerable weight in the United States, not only for media reform but for social reform in general. But by looking outside the United States we can see the fraudulent nature of this claim, for it is in these other lands that democratic forces are mobilizing to oppose the sort of hypercommercial, concentrated corporate media system we have in the United States. The lessons from abroad provide a powerful sense of how Americans can – and, we would argue, must – creatively and constructively approach media reform in the United States.