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**Chapter 13  
Mass Media: For the Many, By the Few**

The mainstream media claim to be free and independent, objective and neutral, the "watchdogs of democracy." A closer look suggests that they behave more like the lapdogs of plutocracy.

**He Who Pays the Piper**

The major news media (or press, the terms are used interchangeably here) are an inherent component of corporate America. As of 2006, only six giant conglomerates—Time Warner, General Electric, Viacom, Bertelsmann, Walt Disney, and News Corporation—(down from twenty-three in 1989) owned most of the newspapers, magazines, book publishing houses, movie studios, cable channels, record labels, broadcast networks and channels, and radio and television programming in the United States with additional holdings abroad. About 85 percent of the daily newspaper circulation in this country belongs to a few giant chains, and the trend in owner concentration continues unabated. All but a handful of the 150 movies produced each year are from six major studios. Big banks and corporations are among the top stockholders of mainstream media. Their representatives sit on the boards of all major publications and broadcast networks.<sup>1</sup>

After heavy lobbying and campaign donations, the broadcast industry secured passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Under this new law, companies that previously were restricted to owning only one radio and one TV outlet in any one local market now could own up to six radio and two television stations in any one area. Most of the nation's 11,000 radio stations were bought up by large conglomerates, the biggest being the right-wing Clear Channel chain with 1,240 stations. Clear Channel uses only two hundred employees to run all these outlets—a feat made possible because most of the stations are operated nationwide by remote control, offering the same prerecorded material. With fewer independent stations came less public-interest programming and more syndicated "hate radio" hosts who railed against liberals, environmentalists, peace demonstrators, feminists, and gays.

In recent times, some giant telephone and cable companies began pressuring Congress to limit the number of Internet servers, in an effort to establish high-fee monopoly control. Their goal has been to create the electronic equivalent of an expensive "fast lane," while relegating all nonpaying users to slower, more limited, and less reliable access.<sup>2</sup>

Media owners do not hesitate to kill stories they dislike and in other ways inject their own preferences into the news. As one group of investigators concluded years ago: "The owners and managers of the press determine which person, which facts, which version of the facts, and which ideas shall reach the public."<sup>3</sup> In recent times, media bosses have refused to run stories or commentaries that reflected favorably on single-payer health insurance, or unfavorably on "free trade" globalization and U.S. military intervention in other countries. Clear Channel canceled an antiwar advertisement, and

stopped playing songs by the Dixie Chicks after that group's lead singer uttered a critical remark about President Bush Jr. In 2004, through its many radio stations, Clear Channel sponsored jingoistic "Rally for America" events around the country in support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. That same year, Walt Disney Co. blocked its Miramax division from distributing a documentary by Academy Award-winner Michael Moore because it offered an unflattering picture of President Bush Jr. Sinclair Group, the largest owner of local TV stations in the country, censored its ABC affiliates for reading the names of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq (which might dampen support for the war). Sinclair sends recorded right-wing editorial commentary to its affiliates to be broadcast as local news, and regularly contributes hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican candidates.<sup>4</sup>

In 2005 Fox News, part of the vast media empire owned by right-wing billionaire Rupert Murdoch, refused to air an advertisement critical of Samuel Alito, President Bush Jr.'s nominee to the Supreme Court. The ad cited examples of the ideologically driven conservative opinions Alito promulgated while serving as an appeals court judge. Also in 2005, a Fox station in New York refused to broadcast a Democratic candidate's ad because it poked fun at President Bush and therefore was deemed "disrespectful." Fox News reportedly quizzes journalistic applicants on whether they are registered Republicans or not. Daily memos come down from the corporate office at Fox telling reporters and commentators what the story of the day should be and what point of view was expected when reporting it.<sup>5</sup>

Corporate advertisers are another powerful group who leave their political imprint on the media. As former president of CBS Frank Stanton remarked, "Since we are advertiser-supported we must take into account the general objective and desires of advertisers as a whole."<sup>6</sup> To give one example among many: a consumer reporter was let go by KCBS-TV in Los Angeles after automotive advertisers repeatedly complained to his bosses about his critical reports on car safety.

Corporate sponsors might cancel advertising accounts not only when they feel that the reporting reflects poorly on their product, but also when- they perceive a "liberal" drift in news and commentary. The prize-winning *Kwintey Report*, a PBS news show that revealed U.S. backing of death squads and dictators in Central America and other hot issues, went off the air because it could not procure corporate funding.<sup>7</sup> Lowell Bergman, former producer of *60 Minutes*, says news producers "are finding it more and more .difficult to do pieces that are critical of Fortune 500 companies, or of sponsors or suppliers to the network."<sup>8</sup>

The media bosses control the journalists, not the other way around. Journalists can sometimes slip critical information into stories, but if they persist, their reports are spiked, they are reassigned, and soon their careers are at risk. A Fox television affiliate in Tampa, Florida, tried to force journalists Jane Akre and Steve Wilson to put a positive spin on a story about Monsanto's use of bovine growth hormone (BGH). In the ensuing court case, the jury awarded Akre \$425,000 in damages for being pressured by Fox to deliberately report a "false" story on the air. The appeals court overturned that decision, declaring that the FCC policy against falsification that Fox violated was just a "policy" and not a "law, rule, or regulation," and so the whistleblower law did not apply. Fox did not deny that it had tried to force Akre to distort the story, but argued that, under the First Amendment, broadcasters have the right to edit news reports as they wished. In 2004, Fox countersued Akre and Wilson for trial fees and costs estimated at over \$1 million.<sup>9</sup>

For reporting on the abuses of corporate America, Frances Cerra incurred the ire of her *New York Times* editors and was transferred to a Long Island beat. There she wrote articles on Shorham nuclear power plant that ran counter to the *Times'* pro-nuclear stance. Her final story was suppressed as "biased"; it reported that the plant was in

serious financial trouble—which proved true. Cerra was never given another assignment.<sup>10</sup>

The managing editor of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, David Mitchell, was sacked for running a series on the dangers of the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Unfortunately for him, the paper's owner was heavily involved in promoting nuclear technology. Tom Gutting, city editor of the *Texas City Sun*, was fired for criticizing Bush Jr.'s performance in the hours after the 9/11 attack. So was columnist Dan Guthrie of the *Daily Courier* in Grant's Pass, Oregon. In a frontpage editorial, Guthrie's bosses announced that criticism of the president and his associates "needs to be responsible and appropriate."<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes a journalist can be penalized for off-duty activities or comments. In 2003 the *San Francisco Chronicle* fired a columnist for participating in a mass demonstration against the U.S. invasion of Iraq—even though California law explicitly states that employers cannot forbid or prevent employees from participating in political activities. In 2005, after correspondent Ashleigh Banfield suggested at a campus talk that news coverage of the Iraq war was sanitized and Americans were not getting the whole story, her NEC contract was not renewed.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile media owners attend political fundraisers and state dinners, contribute to election campaigns, and socialize with high-ranking officeholders, but this is not seen as violating journalistic standards of neutrality and objectivity.

Newspeople who consistently support the worldview of global capitalism and the national security state are the ones more likely to be rewarded with choice assignments, bonuses, and promotions. Additional blandishments, such as lucrative speaker's fees from moneyed interests, often blunt the recipient's critical edge. One might recall how the Shah of Iran, a brutal dictator detested by most of his people, received a glowing press in the United States. For twenty-five years, over five hundred newspeople received the Shah's gifts and were invited to his lavish parties. The few who wrote critically of him were left off his gift list.

When ABC correspondent John Stossel emerged as a laissez-faire ideologue, announcing that "it is my job to explain the beauties of the free market," his career took off. An ardent supporter of chemicalized agribusiness, Stossel claimed that organic food "could kill you" and catastrophic global warming is a "myth." He called for the privatization of Social Security, the curbing of environmental education, and the celebration of greed as a good thing for the economy. Instead of being challenged for his one-sided views, Stossel was given a seven-figure contract and a starring role in numerous TV specials.<sup>13</sup>

The major networks claim their news shows are "fair" and "balanced." But one study found that from 1997 through 2005 conservative guests on network opinion shows outnumbered liberal ones usually by three to one. (Leftist radicals were too scarce as network guests even to be counted.)<sup>14</sup> In 2006, a supposedly liberal network, CNN, hired right-wing opinion maker and gambling addict William Bennett as a political commentator. CNN also hired Glenn Beck, a right-wing radio host. Beck once called the indigent victims of Hurricane Katrina "scumbags," and talked of killing dissidents he disliked.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar spirit, Fox commentator Bill O'Reilly denounced critics of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq as "traitors" who along with "all those clowns at the liberal radio network" should be arrested by the FBI and put "in chains."<sup>16</sup> On Fox News, the conservative-liberal imbalance was the most pronounced of any network. The more people watched Fox News, the more they were misinformed. Fox viewers (an astounding 80 percent) were the most likely to believe one or more of the following: (a) Iraq was linked to the al Qaeda terrorist network, (b) Iraq had weapons of mass

destruction, and (c) world opinion favored the U.S. invasion of Iraq—all demonstrably false statements.<sup>17</sup>

On rare occasions, the news media will go against a strong corporate interest, as with the exposes on how the tobacco industry conspired to hook people on smoking by inserting extra nicotine in cigarettes, and how smoking caused cancer. We knew about the link between smoking and cancer for over half a century. But the press and policy makers gave the issue their attention only after a growing public outcry and numerous class action suits against Big Tobacco. A host of other consumer issues such as carcinogens in cosmetics, radioactive materials in products, the use of industrial sludge as fertilizers, and the unsafe quality of many medications, along with manifold issues relating to the environment, still do not get much exposure.

### **The Ideological Monopoly**

Conservative commentators repeatedly accuse the media of "liberal" bias. In fact, most daily newspapers offer an editorial perspective ranging from blandly centrist to ultraconservative. Over the last seventy years, the Republican presidential candidate has received more newspaper endorsements than the Democrat in sixteen out of eighteen elections. Surveys show that Washington journalists, while more liberal on "cultural issues" such as abortion and gay rights, are more than twice as likely as the general public to support corporate free trade and far more in favor of trimming Medicare and Social Security.<sup>18</sup>

The "expert" guests appearing on newscasts are predominantly government officials (or former officials), corporate heads, and members of conservative think tanks. Likewise, TV pundits, radio talk-show hosts, and syndicated columnists are predominantly and often vehemently conservative. Of the "liberal" commentators who are hailed as representing the "Left," many are little more than "pro-capitalist, middle-of-the-road tepid centrists," as former *New York Times* syndicated "liberal" columnist Anthony Lewis described himself. These liberals are not as far left as the conservatives are far right. The whole left portion of the political spectrum is mostly shut out of the mainstream media. Still, critical information does make its way into the mainstream media—to the great annoyance of conservatives. Much of it is cited in various chapters of this book. What often is missing is any cohesive analysis of the significance of that information. And in many instances, even the most basic information is lacking if it reflects unfavorably on the existing politico-economic order. Consider the media's presentation of some specific topics;

*Economy.* News reports on business rely almost entirely on business sources. The overall corporate economy is more celebrated in the abstract than critically examined in its actualities. The transference of corporate diseconomies onto the public, the outsourcing of capital and jobs to low-wage countries, the increasing accumulation and concentration of wealth for the superrich, the tendency toward chronic recession, inflation, and underemployment, and other such developments are treated superficially, if at all. Poverty remains an unexplained phenomenon in our capitalist paradise. Whether portraying the poor as unworthy idlers or innocent unfortunates, the press seldom gives critical attention to the market forces that create and victimize low-income people. The press has failed to explain the real impact of the national debt and how it generates an upward redistribution of income and undermines public sector spending. Almost nothing is said in the mainstream media about how corporate America regularly puts profits before people, or how "free trade" globalism is really monopoly corporate globalism.

*Elections.* Media coverage of electoral campaigns focuses mostly on the contest per se: who will run, who will win, and what campaign ploys are playing well with the public.

Relatively little attention is given to policy content. News commentators act more like theater critics, reviewing the candidate's performance and style. One study found that more than two-thirds of campaign coverage centers on insider strategy and political maneuvering rather than substantive issues.<sup>19</sup> Progressive candidates find themselves dependent for exposure on mass media that are owned by the same conservative interests they are criticizing. Hoping to educate the public to the issues, they discover that the media allow little or no opportunity for them to make their position understandable to voters who might be willing to listen. The sheer paucity of information can make meaningful campaign dialogue nearly impossible. By withholding coverage of minor-party candidates while bestowing it lavishly on major-party ones, the media help perpetuate the two-party monopoly.

The major media ignored or summarily dismissed the many questions about widespread fraud in the 2004 presidential election (see the next chapter), swiftly declaring Bush Jr. the winner despite flagrant irregularities. The media's systemic ideological role has been to preserve the legitimacy of a national election that some critics have shown to be demonstrably stolen.<sup>20</sup>

*Crime.* The press has helped create the "lock-'em-up" crime craze throughout America. Between 1993 and 1996, the nationwide homicide rate dropped by 20 percent, yet coverage of murders on local TV newscasts leaped many times over. So too the entertainment media became increasingly preoccupied with crime shows. As a result, the number of U.S. residents who ranked crime as the prime problem jumped sixfold.<sup>21</sup> *Corporate* crime, however, is another story, largely an underreported one. The media will denounce particularly greedy and corrupt CEOs—the ones who get caught—while leaving untouched the corporate system that produces them.

*Affirmative Action.* Instead of treating affirmative action as an attempt to redress long-standing injustices, the media has frequently overlooked the persistence of racism and sexism in many walks of life, leaving people with the impression that African Americans and women are enjoying special privileges at the expense of White males.<sup>22</sup>

*Labor.* Most newspapers have large staffs for business news but not a single labor reporter. Reporters seldom enlist labor's views on national questions, while corporate leaders are interviewed regularly. Ordinary workers are virtually never treated as knowledgeable sources about work issues. There are no daily reports about the number of workers killed or injured on the job. Unions are usually noticed only when they go on strike, but the issues behind the strike, such as occupational safety or loss of benefits, are rarely acknowledged. The misleading impression is that labor simply wants too much. Unions make "demands" while management makes "offers."

*Political Protests and Globalization.* Citizens who exercise their democratic rights under the First Amendment by launching protests against official policy often are given short shrift. The hundreds of thousands who have demonstrated around the world against "free trade" treaties have been characterized as violence-prone zealots and "flat-earthers." The major media treat globalization as a benign and inevitable process rather than a transnational corporate strategy to roll back public regulations and democratic protections in countries around the world. With good reason did David Rockefeller, during a speech at the 1991 Bilderberg Conference, declare: "We are grateful to the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, and other great publications whose directors have attended our meetings and respected their promises of discretion for almost forty years. It would have been impossible for us to develop our plan for the world if we had been subjected to the lights of publicity during those years."<sup>23</sup>

*Global Empire and War.* Reports about U.S. involvement in foreign affairs usually rely heavily on government releases. The media support U.S. military interventions into other countries, accepting without critical examination official assumptions that

Washington's continuous war policy is motivated by concerns for democracy, national security, and peace. Some pundits, like *New York Times* columnist and TV commentator Thomas Friedman, are passionate promoters of global corporatism and U.S. military attacks on weaker nations. Friedman called for "bombing Iraq, over and over and over again." One of his favorite slogans is "Give war a chance," which he used in support of U.S. wars against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Commentators stress the importance of maintaining U.S. military might and "credibility" (that is, the willingness to use force and violence).

Little if any positive exposure is given to anti-imperialist struggles or to domestic critics of U.S. overseas interventions. The corporate media, along with NPR and PBS, portrayed the Vietnam War, the U.S. invasions of Grenada and Panama, the destruction of Yugoslavia, and the decade-long bombing attacks and subsequent invasion of Iraq pretty much as the White House and the Pentagon wanted, with little coverage of the underlying imperial interests and the horrendous devastation wreaked by U.S. forces.<sup>25</sup>

Human rights violations in communist North Korea and China are repeatedly noted, while U.S.-supported terrorism in scores of countries, utilizing death squads, massacres, and mass detentions, receive scant notice, if any. The press downplayed the slaughter of some 500,000 Indonesians by the U.S.-supported militarists of that country, as well as the extermination campaign waged by those same militarists in East Timor. The media made little mention of the massive repression of dissident populations in Uruguay, Guatemala, Turkey, El Salvador, Argentina, Haiti, Honduras, Nigeria, Palestine, Zaire, the Philippines, and other U.S.-supported free-market regimes. While supportive of right-wing precapitalist regimes the media are strenuously negative toward leftist movements and governments such as Castro's Cuba and Chavez's Venezuela. The media have had little to say about U.S.-supported counterrevolutionary mercenary forces in Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and elsewhere, whose blood-drenched campaigns took hundreds of thousands of lives.

Meanwhile, the space program is reported the way NASA wants, with scarcely a word given to those who criticize its costs and the serious damage it does to the earth's protective ozone layer.

### **Serving Officialdom**

Getting too close to the truth can prove harmful. In a series of deeply researched articles in the *San Jose Mercury News*, reporter Gary Webb exposed the CIA's involvement in the drug traffic between the contras (U.S.-supported mercenary troops in Central America) and inner-city dealers in the United States. Webb was swiftly subjected to a barrage of counterattacks from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the major TV networks, and other keepers of permissible opinion. They accused him of saying things he had not said, while ignoring the more damning and well-substantiated heart of his findings. Eventually, Webb's editor caved in to the pressure, making a public self-criticism for having published the series. Webb left the *Mercury News*, his career in shambles. A subsequent report by the CIA itself largely confirmed his charges.<sup>27</sup>

In 1998 CNN producers April Oliver and Jack Smith ran a story accusing the U.S. military of using sarin, a highly lethal nerve gas, in an operation in Laos in 1970 that killed about one hundred people, including two American defectors. An immediate storm of abuse descended upon Oliver and Smith from the Pentagon. CNN hastily issued a fawning retraction and fired the two producers. Oliver and Smith put together a report showing that their story was based entirely on testimony by U.S. military personnel,

including participants in the operation who stood by their stories.<sup>28</sup> This report received almost no attention in the media.

Scores of supposedly "independent and objective" journalists move back and forth in their careers between media and government, in what has been called the "revolving door." David Gergen served in the Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton administrations, and in between was an editor at U.S. *News and World Report* and a PBS commentator. Pat Buchanan was a Nixon staff writer, a columnist and TV opinion-show host for CNN, a Reagan staff writer, then a CNN host again.<sup>29</sup>

More than four hundred U.S. journalists, including nationally syndicated columnists, editors, and major publishers, have carried out covert assignments for the CIA over the last four decades, gathering intelligence abroad or publishing the kind of stories that create a domestic climate of opinion supportive of U.S. interventionism. Included among them were such prominent press moguls as William Paley, erstwhile head of CBS; Henry Luce, late owner of Time Inc.; and Arthur Hays Sulzberger, late publisher of the *New York Times*. The Central Intelligence Agency has owned more than 240 media operations around the world, including newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, radio and television stations, and wire services. Many Third World countries get more news from the CIA and other Western sources than from Third World news organizations. Stories exposing the major media's complicity with the CIA were themselves suppressed by the major media.<sup>30</sup>

If Cuban or Chinese or Venezuelan journalists were shown to work for their government's intelligence agency, and if they were found to be intermittently occupying official positions within the Cuban government, including secret operations, it would be taken as a sure sign of the absence of an independent press. But not so with U.S. news media.

The Justice Department won a Supreme Court decision allowing the government to issue subpoenas requiring newspeople to disclose their sources to grand-jury investigators, in effect making the press an investigative arm of the very officialdom over whom it is supposed to act as a watchdog. One study found that more than 3,500 subpoenas were served on members of the news media in one year alone.<sup>31</sup> Dozens of reporters have been jailed or threatened with prison terms for trying to protect their sources by refusing to hand over materials and tapes. Such government coercion creates a chilling effect, encouraging the press to avoid trouble from officialdom by censoring itself.

Government officials give choice leads to sympathetic journalists and withhold information from troublesome ones. They meet regularly with media bosses to discuss specific stories. And every day, the White House, the Pentagon, and other agencies release thousands of self-serving reports to the media, many of which are then uncritically transmitted to the public as news from independent sources. The Bush Jr. administration secretly confected favorable news reports about itself by hiring actors to pose as journalists, producing phony "video news releases" that were distributed and broadcasted as "news" by hundreds of local TV stations. The Bushites also paid several real journalists tens of thousands of dollars—in government funds—to produce news and opinion pieces that promoted Bush Jr.'s policies. According to the Government Accountability Office, such acts violated the law against spreading "covert propaganda" within the United States at public expense. But the Republican-controlled Congress took no action against the president. The Bush people also hired someone (an erstwhile male prostitute who had paid numerous visits to the White House) to pose as a journalist under a fictitious name, so that he could ask planted questions of the president and his press secretary at news conferences.<sup>32</sup>

## Political Entertainment

The entertainment media (movies and television shows) undergo a rigorous political censorship. Even the *New York Times* admits that network "production and standards" (censorship) departments have reduced their policing of sexual and other cultural taboos, but "network censors continue to be vigilant when it comes to overseeing the *political* content of television films."<sup>33</sup> Under the Bush Jr. administration, this changed, with the FCC more aggressively policing sexual/cultural taboos, largely in response to organized efforts by the religious right. Television shows and films that treat anti-imperialist and anti-corporate themes have trouble getting sponsors and funding. Even if produced, they are likely to get very limited distribution. Such was the fate of movies like *Salt of the Earth*, *Burn*, *Winter Soldier*, *Salvador*, *Reds*, *1900*, *Matewan*, and *Romero*.<sup>34</sup> What is considered a political or nonpolitical film is itself a political judgment. Almost all mainstream entertainment is political in one way or another. Even movies and television shows that do not promote a specifically political story line may propagate images and themes that support militarism, imperialism, racism, sexism, authoritarianism, and other undemocratic values. In the entertainment world, adversities are caused by ill-willed individuals and cabals, never by the injustices of the socio-economic system. Problems are solved by individual derring-do rather than by organized collective effort.

In the media's entertainment world, nefarious violence is met with righteous violence, although it is often difficult to distinguish the two. By the time he finishes elementary school, a typical American male child will have seen eight thousand TV murders, as well as many thousands more beatings, attacks, and other acts of violence. Studies indicate that people who watch a lot of crime shows have a higher fear of crime and urban minorities, and are more willing to accept authoritarian solutions.<sup>35</sup>

Women are still marketed as sexual objects in ads and story lines, but in recent years they are also depicted as intelligent and capable persons, occupying positions of authority and responsibility. The same holds for African Americans, although they still appear far less often than Whites in leading roles. Latinos are the most underrepresented group in prime-time television, closely followed by Asian Americans, while Native Americans are virtually invisible (except for the hackneyed "cowboy and Indian" flicks).

Years ago African Americans predictably played servants and street criminals. Now they play police and street criminals, still usually in minor roles. The Black police captain scolding the hero cop and the Black judge (frequently female) admonishing courtroom lawyers have become new African American stock characters. African Americans abound in prime-time sitcoms, playing for laughs, but the more serious struggles faced by the African American community in almost every area of life and work are rarely afforded realistic portrayal. African American actors still experience a shortage of racially nonspecific roles dealing with real-life problems.

There have been some notable exceptions to the dismal fare served up to mass audiences. Some years ago, *A Civil Action* cast a revealing light on the venality of corporate polluters, as did *Erin Brockovich*. *Iron Jawed Angels* gave a fine portrayal of the women's suffragist movement, and in 2005, *North Country* depicted the struggle by female miners against workplace sexist harassment. Both *Syriana* and *Good Night and Good Luck* pursued topics that were critical of the powers that be. However, most films and television shows produced in the business-owned entertainment world give scarce attention, if any, to important and potentially fascinating social, cultural, political, and historical themes.<sup>36</sup>

In recent years the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) has become more sensitive to race, gender, and gay issues but still virtually ignores working-class concerns, out of fear

of alienating corporate underwriters. When labor unions have funded documentaries and dramas having a working-class perspective, public-television bosses usually have refused to run them, claiming that labor (with its millions of workers) represents a "special interest."<sup>37</sup>

### **Room for Alternatives?**

In sum, the news is a product not only of deliberate manipulation but of the ideological and economic power structure under which journalists operate and into which they are socialized. If we consider censorship to be a danger to our freedom, then we should understand that the media are already censored by those who own or advertise in them and by the corporate-dominated political culture that sets limits on what is permissible opinion.

Sometimes, however, the media cannot easily suppress and distort realities about the world because reality itself is radical. The Third World really is poor and exploited; the U.S. government really does side with the rich oligarchs and suppresses leftist reform movements at home and abroad; the gap between wealth and poverty really is growing ever greater in most of the world; there really is crime and corruption in high places; the environment really is facing catastrophic dangers caused mostly by massive fossil-fuel consumption; corporations do wield enormous power and do downsize their workforce while reaping record profits. To maintain some connection to the world, the press must occasionally report glimmers of these realities. When it does, the rightists complain furiously about a "liberal bias." Furthermore, the press is not entirely immune to more democratic and popular pressure. Despite the media's misrepresentation and neglect, if a well-organized and persistent public opinion builds around an issue, it occasionally can break through the media sound barrier.

Is there any alternative to the major media? The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 did launch the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) as an alternative to commercial television. Instead of being independently financed by a sales tax on television sets or some such method, PBS was made dependent on annual appropriations from Congress and was run by a board appointed by the president. PBS and National Public Radio (NPR) are now required to match federal funds with money from other sources, including listener contributions and corporate sponsors. Both NPR and PBS offer pundits and "experts" who are as politically safe as any found on the commercial networks. But the occasionally mild liberal note that is struck is still too much for reactionary rulers. In 2006 the White House proposed cutting support for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which provides much of the funding for NPR and PBS.<sup>3</sup>

Of the many high-quality documentaries made by independent producers dealing with important political controversies, few are accorded mainstream exposure. Thus *Faces of War*, revealing the U.S.-supported counterinsurgency destruction visited upon the people of El Salvador, was denied broadcast rights in twenty-two major television markets. The award-winning *Building Bombs* and the expose on the Iran-contra affair, *Coverup*, were both denied access to PBS and all commercial channels. *Deadly Deception*, a documentary critical of General Electric and the environmental devastation wreaked by the nuclear weapons industry, won the Academy Award yet, with a few local exceptions, was shut out of commercial and public television. So too was the Academy-Award winning documentary *Panama Deception*, which offered a critical expose of the U.S. invasion of Panama.

Many areas of the country are awash in talk shows and news commentary that are outspokenly ultrarightist, pro-corporate, militaristic, antiunion, and antifeminist. Wealthy conservatives have poured millions of dollars into building the religious right's numerous

radio and television outlets, including the Christian Broadcasting Network, which has as many affiliates as ABC. There is a significant religious left in this country, dedicated to peace and social justice issues, but it gets no big financial backing and therefore owns no major media outlets.

Denied access to mainstream media, the political left has attempted to get its message across through community and listener-sponsored radio stations and small publications that suffer chronic financial difficulties and sometimes undergo harassment from police, the FBI, rightist vigilantes, the IRS, and the U.S. Postal Service. Skyrocketing postal rates effect a real hardship on dissident publications. At the same time, the government continues to subsidize billions of pieces of junk mail sent out by business and advertising firms.

For a while, unlicensed "microradio" or "pirate" radio stations began burgeoning across the country. These pirate stations transmit in a limited one to five mile radius, too small to interfere with larger signals. The real nuisance they pose is their use of the airwaves to voice heterodox views. Micro stations in a number of locales have been forcibly shut down by the FCC and local police, who broke into their premises and hauled off their broadcast equipment. There are also legal low-power stations (LPFM) that are required to have a license or waiver from the FCC under penalty of law. A station seeking an LPFM license has to be in areas where there is space on the dial, which rules out most urban areas. Over half the LPFM licenses granted by the FCC have gone to right-wing church groups.<sup>39</sup>

The airwaves are the property of the people of the United States and should be open to divergent views. Here are some modest proposals for a more democratic media:

- The antitrust law that limits the number of media outlets any one corporation can own should be revived.
- The amount of air time given to advertising should again be limited.
- The networks ought to pay for use of the public airways, and these fees should go to financing noncommercial public broadcasting. Public television and radio should be funded by a public tax system rather than by rich corporate "underwriters."
- All broadcast stations should be required to allocate time for free and open debates among a diverse array of political proponents, including the most progressive and revolutionary.

There once did exist a "Fairness Doctrine," a law requiring that time be given to an opposing viewpoint after a station broadcasted an editorial opinion. But there was no requirement as to the diversity of the opposing viewpoints, so usually the range was between two only slightly different stances. The FCC ruled that broadcast time should not be made available to "communists or the communist viewpoint" but only to "persons other than communists."<sup>40</sup> But even this pale and slanted law was too much for the reactionaries. President Reagan vetoed it in 1987 when Congress attempted to renew it.

Ultimately the only protection against corporate-dominated monopoly media is ownership by the people themselves, with provisions for the inclusion of a broad spectrum of conflicting views. This is not as chimerical or radical as it sounds. In the early 1920s, before it was swallowed up by commercial interests, radio consisted primarily of hundreds of not-for-profit stations run mostly by colleges, labor unions, and community groups.<sup>41</sup> Today, more community-supported radio stations and public access cable-TV stations are needed. The microradio station should be encouraged, for it is among the most democratic of media, requiring almost no capital while being relatively more accessible to the community in which it operates. The Internet also offers

progressive Web sites that provide information and opinion rarely accommodated by mainstream media,

Those who own the newspapers and networks will not relinquish their hold over the communication universe. Ordinary citizens will not have access until they can gain control over the resources that could give them access, an achievement that would take a different kind of economic system than the corporate "free market" we have. In the meantime, Americans should have no illusions about the "free and independent press" they are said to enjoy.

## Notes

1. On media concentration, see Ben Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Beacon Press, 2004).
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