

McChesney, R. W. & Nichols, J. (2000). *It's the media, stupid*. New York: Seven Stories Press, pp. 21 – 25, 27 – 39, and 119 – 120.

Participatory self-government or democracy, works best when at least three criteria are met. First, it helps when there are not significant disparities in economic wealth and property ownership across the society. Such disparities undermine the ability of citizens to act as equals. Secondly, it helps when there is a sense of community and a notion that an individual's well-being is determined to no small extent by the community's well-being. This provides democratic political culture with a substance that cannot exist if everyone is simply out to advance narrowly defined self-interests, even if those interests might be harmful to the community as a whole. Third, democracy requires that there be an effective system of political communication, broadly construed, that informs and engages the citizenry, drawing people meaningfully into the polity. This becomes especially important as societies grow larger and more complex, but has been true for all societies dedicated toward self-government. While democracies by definition must respect individual freedoms, these freedoms can only be exercised in a meaningful sense when the citizenry is informed, engaged, and participating. Moreover, without this, political debate can scarcely address the central issues of power and resource allocation that must be at the heart of public deliberation in a democracy. As James Madison noted, "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."

These three criteria are related. In nondemocratic societies those in power invariably dominate the communication systems to maintain their rule. In democratic societies the manner by which the media system is structured, controlled and subsidized is of central political importance. Control over the means of communication is an integral aspect of political and economic power. In many nations, to their credit, media policy debates have been and are important political issues. In the U.S., to the contrary, private commercial control over communication is often regarded as innately democratic and benevolent, and therefore not subject to political discussion. Government involvement with media or communication is almost universally denigrated in the U.S. as a direct invitation to tyranny, no matter how well intended. The preponderance of U.S. mass communications is controlled by less than two dozen enormous profit-maximizing corporations, which receive much of their income from advertising placed largely by other huge corporations. But the extent of this media ownership and control goes generally unremarked in the media and intellectual culture, and there appears to be little sense of concern about its dimensions among citizenry as a whole.

It was the rainiest, wettest, coldest April morning Washington had seen in a long time. And still they came—thousands of mostly young activists determined to mount a non-violent but noisy protest outside the spring 2000 meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As they reached a key intersection near the World Bank building, they were blocked by armed battalions of riot police and National Guardsmen. The authorities stood their ground, but the Mobilization for Global Justice activists refused to back down.

This was the sort of standoff to which even the most jaded television assignment editors dispatched their crews—despite the fact that the weather made for some fogged-up camera lenses. On the street, a reporter for one Washington television station pulled aside a young woman who was soaking wet, and announced to the cameraman that it was time to do a live shot. When the signal came that they were on air, the reporter started to make small talk with the activist about the miserable weather. "I really want to talk about the policies of the World Bank and the IMF," the young woman said. "Their structural adjustment policies are causing real harm in specific countries around the world ..." The reporter pulled the microphone back, looked to the camera and said, "Well, everybody has an opinion. Let's go back to the anchor desk."

That same afternoon, as young people who had attended teach-ins, listened to debates and read literature and books in preparation for the demonstration continued to face down the police in the streets, conservative commentator Tony Snow was attacking the protestors on Washington radio as ignorant and uninformed. The next morning, *The Wall Street Journal* referred to them as "Global Village Idiots." The supposedly liberal *Washington Post* and *New York Times* editorial pages both dismissed the protests as not much more than a waste of police resources and everyone else's time. And, despite the fact that at least 150 activists were still in jail, and that people in Washington, across the nation and indeed, around the world, were buzzing about a new era of activism, television news programs went back to broadcasting the usual mix of commercials and vapid "news you can use."

Molly Ivins put it rather succinctly when she observed, a few days later, that "for reasons unclear to me, the mainstream media seem to have decided that anyone who questions any aspect of globalization is an extremist nut, despite the rather obvious fact that global poverty is growing under the kind auspices of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization."

In our view, the reasons for this are clear. The closer a story gets to examining corporate power the less reliable our corporate media system is as a source of information that is useful to the citizens of a democracy. And on issues like the global capitalist economy, the corporate media are doubly unreliable, because they rank as perhaps the foremost beneficiaries of Wall Street designed trade deals like NAFTA, and of the machinations of the three multilateral agencies developed to shape the global economy to serve corporate interests: the World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Moreover, almost all the favored mainstream sources for coverage of global economic affairs are strident advocates for a corporate-driven vision of globalization. Thus, corporate journalists—even those low enough on the pecking order to be dispatched to stand in the rain on a Washington street corner—generally will find arguments against the status quo incomprehensible.

Just as the media dropped the ball in Washington in April 2000, it blew a chance to cover an even more dramatic story of citizens speaking truth to power in the fall of 1999, when the WTO met in Seattle. As one of the most significant challenges to global economics in decades was playing out—a challenge so powerful that the WTO meetings were actually shut down for a time and ultimately failed to launch a new round of trade liberalization, a challenge so intense that President Clinton felt compelled to assert his agreement on a variety of issues with those protesting in the streets—the broadcast media treated the story as an event of secondary importance. There was no round-the-clock coverage, as was seen only four months earlier when John F. Kennedy Jr.'s fatal plane crash reshaped the broadcast schedules of CNN, the Fox News Channel, and every other cable TV news service for two full weeks. During the WTO meetings and demonstrations—which dealt with arguably the most important political issues of our age—no attempt was made to provide comprehensive coverage. One night, as demonstrators filled the streets of Seattle and ministers of finance battled through the night over the most fundamental questions of how the global economy would be structured, as the President of the U.S. hunkered down in a hotel surrounded by armed troops, the Fox News Channel interrupted its scheduled programming for a live special report... not from Seattle, but from the scene of the latest doings of the parents of JonBenet Ramsey.

What happened in Seattle sums up the crisis for democracy that occurs when the media system is set up primarily to maximize profit for a handful of enormous self-interested corporations. An Orwellian disconnect is created. The news required for a functional democracy—the news that empowers citizens to act in their own interest and for the good of society—is discarded to make way for the trivial, sensational, and salacious. How many Americans have come home from a school board meeting, a city council session, a local demonstration or a mass national rally to discover the vital issues they had just addressed are being ignored or distorted? The flow of information that is the lifeblood of democracy is being choked by a media system that every day ignores a world of injustice and inequality, and the growing resistance to it. ...

Back in 1992, Bill Clinton's campaign strategists hung a sign in the war room of their Little Rock headquarters that read, "It's the economy, stupid." The point of the sign was to remind campaign workers to circle every discussion of election issues around to the subject of the sagging economy. In many senses, this book is like that sign. We are here to argue that it's time to point out the connections between media reform and democratic renewal. To sound a wake up call reminding us that access to communications is a non-negotiable demand in a democratic society, and that scoring real victories for labor, the environment, and social justice will be made all the more possible by opening up the democratizing the media. Meanwhile, when the corporate press comes looking for a soundbite on what the ruckus is all about, tell them, "It's the media, stupid."

Americans devour media at a staggering rate; in 1999 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 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. It is instead a world where highly concentrated corporate power is pulling the strings to dominate our existence so as to maximize return to shareholders, and 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. It is a poison pill for democracy.

Yet in our American democracy the issue of media 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 2000, however, it becomes clear that this circumstance must shift. The case for making media an issue is made, above all, by a survey of the contemporary media landscape.

In 2000, the U.S. media system is dominated by fewer than ten transnational conglomerates: Disney, AOL-Time Warner, News Corporation, Viacom, Seagram (Universal), Sony, Liberty (AT&T), Bertelsmann, and General Electric (NEC). Their media revenues range from roughly \$8 billion to \$30 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. 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. Another twelve to fifteen firms, which do from \$2 or \$3 billion to \$8 billion per year in business, round out the system. These firms—like Comcast, Hearst, New York Times, Washington Post, 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.

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.

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 1999 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 the marketplace of ideas. 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. But this sounds very abstract, so let's cut to the bone: the problem with concentrated media is that it accentuates the two main problems of commercial media, hypercommercialism and denigration of public service. These are really two sides of the same coin. As massive media corporations are better able to commercially carpet bomb 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 they do destructive things by rationally following the market cues they are given. We have a media system set up to serve private investors first and foremost, not public citizens.

No better example of how this process works can be found than in the U.S. radio industry. Since deregulation of ownership in 1996, some one-half of 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. 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. "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 in 1999. "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 some \$214 billion in the U.S. on advertising in 1999—some 2.4 percent of the GDP—and almost all 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 pummel their customers with ads and to bend over backward to make their media attractive to Madison Avenue. 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. 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 foundation 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 long-standing 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 subfield of Product Placement Cinema." Conglomerate control of films and music and television (all of the TV networks, all of the main studios but the floundering MGM, and all four of the firms that dominate the U.S. music scene are owned by the eight largest media firms) 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 hedge 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 pablum 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 real of journalism. 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 that time 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 hypercommercialism 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.

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. So it is that relatively vast resources are deployed for news pitched at a narrow business class, and suited to their needs and prejudices; it is predominant in newspapers, magazines, and 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. But that 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

U.S. 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 ABC *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 *LA. Times*, Otis Chandler, sent a letter to the staff describing the new management's move as "unbelievably stupid and unprofessional."

Above all, however, the *LA. 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.

In addition to triviality and craven commercialism, the willingness or capacity of U.S. journalism to challenge elite assumptions or to question the status quo—never especially great in the best of times—has shriveled. So it was, for example, that the preponderance of media coverage of the 1999 war in Kosovo lamely reflected elite opinion in the U.S., when even the rudimentary application of traditional journalism standards would point to severe discrepancies in the official story line.

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 today's media?

What is necessary, in the end, is for media reform to be advanced as part of a progressive platform for democratic reform across society. The foundation of a broader progressive platform will be the demand for social justice and an attack upon social inequality and the moral stench of a society operated purely along commercial lines. In the U.S. today, the richest one percent of the population has as much money to spend as the poorest 100 million Americans, double the ratio for just twenty years earlier. The political system reinforces this inequality by being, as is now roundly acknowledged, a plaything for big business where the interests of the balance of society have been pushed to the margins if not forgotten. The corporate media system reinforces this inequality and rule of the market and limits the possibility of democratic reform. In sum, media reform is inexorably intertwined with broader democratic reform; they rise and fall together.

Hence we return to the point that emerged forcefully in the analysis of media reform around the world: the importance of political parties to provide necessary leadership and to force the issue into the political arena. In the U.S., both the Republican and Democratic Parties, with only a few prominent exceptions, have been and are in the pay of the corporate media and communication giants. It is unlikely that any breakthroughs can be expected there until much spadework is done. The logical place to begin that spadework ought to be the small parties and factions of the left in America, the New Party, the Greens, the Labor Party, Democratic Socialists of America, Americans

for Democratic Action, and U.S. Action. In our view, all of these groups need to incorporate media reform issues into their platforms and their visions. Ideally, these organizations, which have remarkably similar stances on a host of issues, might adopt a shared vision—perhaps as a step toward building the sort of labor, left, green, feminist, people of color coalitions seen in New Zealand's Alliance Party, Iceland's Alliance, and other Third Left groupings. In Wisconsin, already, the Greens and New Party activists are working together on joint projects. In Washington, D.C., the Greens have merged with the D.C. Statehood Party.

Sadly, however, these new left parties have dropped the ball concerning media so far, with only one or two exceptions. As U.S. Rep. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont independent who is the only socialist member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and who has made media reform a central issue for over a decade has noted: "This is an issue that is absolutely vital to democracy, and that only the left can address. The New Party, the Green Party, the Labor Party, progressive Democrats should be all over this issue. But, for most of the left, it's not even on the agenda." This has to change, and change soon, both for the sake of media reform and for the sake of these parties and progressive politics in the United States. It is difficult for us to imagine a better place to build trust and cooperation across these left groupings than with a shared response to media, which has been so devastatingly dismissive of third-party initiatives, save those of billionaire hot dogs Ross Perot and Donald Trump.

Who would contribute to the shaping of a progressive media reform platform. Ideally, it would be shaped as similar platforms in Sweden, Finland, Canada, and other lands have been. Local and national groups working on media reform would participate. There would also be significant input from media unions, such as the Newspaper Guild, the National Writers Union, and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. We believe these groups could get the ball rolling by coming together in support of a set of basic principles not unlike those advanced by Britain's Campaign for Press and Broadcast Freedom.

There is every reason to believe that these groups could ultimately agree on an agenda that calls for basic reforms, such as:

1. Expansion of funding for traditional public-service broadcasting with an eye toward making it fully non-commercial and democratically accountable. In particular, substantial new funding should be provided for the development of news and public affairs programming that will fill the gap created by the collapse of serious newsgathering by the networks and their local affiliates.

2. Development of non-commercial, community-run, public-access television and radio systems that are distinct from public-service broadcasting and that are deeply rooted in local communities. As part of this initiative, the federal government should remove barriers to the development of microradio initiatives. Seed money, similar to that provided by government and foundations for economic development in low-income and minority communities, should be targeted toward groups seeking to develop microradio.

3. Setting far stricter standards for commercial broadcasters in exchange for granting them broadcast licenses. For example, why not ban or strictly limit advertising on children's programs and on news broadcasts? Why not take a percentage of the broadcasters' revenues and set it aside for creative people and journalists to control time set aside for children's shows and newscasts? Why not make a condition of receiving a broadcast license that the broadcaster will not carry any paid political advertising during electoral campaigns? And that they will provide free time to all, liberally defined, viable candidates?

4. Creation of a broad initiative to limit advertising in general, using regulation and taxation to prevent commercial saturation.

5. Reassertion of anti-trust protections in order to limit the amount of media that can be owned by one firm. Why not, for example, limit radio stations to one per owner? The benefits of

concentrated ownership accrue entirely to owners, not to the public. Make it government policy to encourage diversity of ownership and diversity of editorial opinions, as was intended by the First Amendment. There should, as well, be a reassertion of traditional restrictions on cross-ownership of media within particular communities.

6. Renewing the commitment of the U.S. government to develop incentives aimed at encouraging and protecting minority ownership of broadcast and cable outlets.

7. Promotion of newspaper and magazine competition through the use of tax deductions or subsidies. One approach might allow taxpayers to deduct the cost of a limited number of newspaper and magazine subscriptions—as some professionals and academics now do. Such an initiative would boost the circulations of publications from across the ideological spectrum, but would be particularly helpful to publications that target low-income, working-class, and elderly citizens, as well as students. Significantly lowered postal fees for nonprofit publications that have minimal advertising might also be appropriate.

8. Strengthen the position of media unions by encouraging the development of a stronger role for workers in determining the editorial content of news publications and broadcast news. As in European countries, union protections in the U.S. should be strengthened in order to assure that working journalists are free to perform their duties with an eye toward serving the public interest.

9. Develop a new national program of subsidies for film and cultural production, particularly by members of ethnic and racial minority groups, women, low-income citizens, and others who frequently have a hard time finding market support for their artistic expressions.

10. Use tax breaks and subsidies to promote creation of publishing and production cooperatives and other arts and culture vehicles designed to provide non-commercial outlets for writers and artists to bring meaningful, controversial, and substantive work to mass audiences. One proposal put forth by economist Dean Baker would let any American redirect \$150 from their tax payments to any nonprofit medium of their choice. This could funnel as much as \$25 billion into nonprofit media and create a very healthy competition among new and revitalized outlets for democratic and cultural expression. All this could be done without any government official gumming up the works.

In combination, these proposals would go a long way toward creating a strong democratic sector on the rapidly commercializing Internet, as every medium today has a web component almost by definition. By the same token, media reformers must demand that there be formal hearings and public deliberations on the future of digital communication systems. At present the crucial technical decisions are being made quietly behind closed doors to the benefit of the corporate community. That has to be stopped.

We believe that a media reform movement with clear goals and a clear strategy for achieving them will be a fundamental building block of a broad crusade for democratic renewal in America—a bold, powerful and ultimately successful initiative that has the potential to make this nation's promise for democracy real. It will be a movement that takes an issue too long neglected and pushes that concern to the center of the national debate. It will be a movement that gives us an answer to the powers-that-be who seek constantly to divert us from issues of consequence. It will be a movement that empowers us to respond to their distractions and deceits by laughing in their faces and saying: "It's the media, stupid."