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REVIEW OF THE MONTH

Journalism, Democracy, ... and Class Struggle

by Robert W. McChesney

Topics: Incarceration, Inequality, Media

(Nov 01, 2000)

Socialists since the time of Marx have been proponents of democracy, but they have argued that democracy in capitalist societies is fundamentally flawed. In capitalist societies, the wealthy have tremendous social and economic advantages over the working class that undermine political equality, a presupposition for viable democracy. In addition, under capitalism the most important economic issues—investment and control over production—are not the province of democratic politics but, rather, the domain of a small number of wealthy firms and individuals seeking to maximize their profit in competition with each other. This means that political affairs can only indirectly influence economics, and that any party or individual in power has to be careful not to antagonize wealthy investors so as to instigate an investment strike and an economic collapse that would generally mean political disaster.

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For socialists, the purpose of class politics is to eliminate class exploitation, poverty, and social inequality and to lay the foundation for a genuine democracy, where people truly rule their own lives. The strategy and tactics best suited to accomplishing these goals have been the subject of tremendous debate among socialists, but the goals have almost always been the same. For most of their history, socialists have been at the forefront of movements to extend the franchise and the scope of democracy, both within capitalist societies and extending beyond capitalist property relations.

A central concern in democratic theory of all stripes is how people can have the information, knowledge, and forums for communication and debate necessary to govern their own lives effectively. The solution to this problem is found, in theory, in systems of education and media. But then the nature of the educational and media systems comes into focus as a crucial issue. If these systems are flawed and undermine democratic values, it is awfully difficult to conceive of a viable democratic society. Therefore, public debates over education and media policy are central to debates over the nature of democracy in any given society. Today, for example, the United States is in the midst of a massive campaign by the political right to privatize education, effectively dismantling public education systems, making the system explicitly class-based, and subjecting education for the non-elite to commercial values. The antidemocratic implications of these developments can hardly be exaggerated.

The situation is even more severe for democratic values in media, though this receives far less attention in the official political culture. In particular, journalism is that product of the media system that deals directly with political education. Within democratic theory, there are two indispensable functions that journalism must serve in a self-governing society. First, the media system must provide a rigorous accounting of people in power and people who want to be in power, in both the public and private sector. This is known as the watchdog role. Second, the media system must provide reliable information and a wide range of informed opinions on the important social and political issues of the day. No single medium can or should be expected to provide all of this; but the media system as a whole should provide easy access to this for all citizens. Unless a society has a journalism that approaches these goals, it can scarcely be a self-governing society of political equals.

By these criteria, the U.S. media system is an abject failure. It serves as a tepid and weak-kneed watchdog over those in power. And it scarcely provides any reliable information or range of debate on most of the basic political and social issues of the day. As Jeff Cohen, the founder of Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), puts it, on those issues covered the range

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of debate extends from General Electric (GE) to General Motors (GM). The media system is, in short, an antidemocratic force. But that should not surprise us. The media system in the United States does not exist to serve democracy, it exists to generate maximum profit to the small number of very large firms and billionaire investors. It does this job very well. So, in media, we see the core contradiction of our age, where the democratic interests of the many are undermined by the private selfish interests of the powerful few.

The Rise and Fall of Professional Journalism

Much discussion of journalism is predicated on a notion that it is a professional enterprise, politically neutral in tone, and independent of commercial values. This is a fairly recent notion historically, so let's put it in context. Although in many respects the problem of the media for democracy is more important today than ever before, it is a problem as old as democracy itself. When the U.S. constitution was drafted in 1789, it included explicit provisions regarding copyright, so as to balance the interests of authors with those of the broader community for inexpensive information. When the First Amendment was passed two years later, it included the specific protection of a free press (in addition to several other core freedoms, including speech and assembly). The concern was that the dominant political party or faction would outlaw opposition newspapers—all newspapers were partisan in orientation at the time—unless they were prohibited from doing so, as was then the common practice in Europe. If there could be no dissident press, there could be no democracy. Karl Marx, who supported himself for much of his life as a journalist, was a steadfast proponent of this notion of a free press.

During the nineteenth century, the press system remained explicitly partisan but it increasingly became an engine of great profits as costs plummeted, population increased, and advertising—which emerged as a key source of revenues—mushroomed. The commercial press system became less competitive and ever more clearly the domain of wealthy individuals, who usually had the political views associated with their class. Throughout this era, socialists, feminists, abolitionists, trade unionists, and radicals *writ large* tended to regard the mainstream commercial press as the mouthpiece of their enemies, and established their own media to advance their interests. Indeed, the history of the left and left media during this period are almost interchangeable.

The twentieth century, with the rise of monopoly capital, witnessed a sea change in U.S. media. On the one hand, the dominant newspaper industry became increasingly concentrated into fewer massive chains and all but the largest communities only had one or two dailies. The economics of advertising-supported newspapers erected barriers to entry that made it virtually impossible for small, independent newspapers to succeed, despite the protection of the constitution for a "free press." At the same time, new technologies helped pave the way for the commercial development of national magazines, recorded music, film, radio, and, later, television as major industries. These all became highly concentrated industries and engines of tremendous profits. (By 2000, the largest media and communication firms rank among the largest firms in the economy.)

At the beginning of the twentieth century these developments led to a crisis of sorts for U.S. media—or the press, as it was then called. Commercial media were coming to play a larger and larger role in people's lives (and by 1999, media consumption would increase to more than eleven hours per day for the average American) yet the media industries were increasingly the province of a relatively small number of large commercial concerns operating in noncompetitive markets. The era of the viable "alternative" press was in rapid retreat. The First Amendment promise of a "free press" was being altered fundamentally. What was originally meant as a protection for citizens effectively to advocate diverse political viewpoints was being transformed into commercial protection for media corporation investors and managers in noncompetitive markets to do as they pleased to maximize profit with no public responsibility.

In particular, the rise of the modern commercial press system drew attention to the severe contradiction between a privately held media system and the needs of a democratic society, especially in the provision of journalism. It was one thing to posit that a commercial media system worked for democracy when there were numerous newspapers in a community, when barriers to entry were relatively low, and when immigrant and dissident media proliferated widely, as was the case for much of the nineteenth century. For newspapers to be partisan at that time was no big problem because there were alternative viewpoints present. It was quite another thing to make such a claim by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when all but the largest communities only had one or two newspapers, usually owned by chains or very wealthy and powerful individuals. For journalism to remain partisan in this context, for it to advocate the interests of the owners and the advertisers who subsidized it, would cast severe doubt on the credibility of the journalism. As Henry Adams put it at the time, "The press is the hired agent of a monied system, set up for no other reason than to tell lies where the interests are concerned." In short, it was widely thought that journalism was explicit class propaganda in a war with only one side armed. Such a belief was very dangerous for the business of newspaper publishing, as many potential readers would find it incredible and unconvincing.

It was in the cauldron of controversy, during the Progressive era, that the notion of professional journalism came of age. Savvy publishers understood that they needed to have

their journalism appear neutral and unbiased, notions entirely foreign to the journalism of the era of the Founding Fathers, or their businesses would be far less profitable. Publishers pushed for the establishment of formal “schools of journalism” to train a cadre of professional editors and reporters. None of these schools existed in 1900; by 1915, all the major schools such as Columbia, Northwestern, Missouri, and Indiana were in full swing. The notion of a separation of the editorial operations from the commercial affairs—termed the separation of church and state—became the professed model. The argument went that trained editors and reporters were granted autonomy by the owners to make the editorial decisions, and these decisions were based on their professional judgment, not the politics of the owners and the advertisers, or their commercial interests to maximize profit. Readers could trust what they read. Owners could sell their neutral monopoly newspapers to everyone in the community and rake in the profits.

Of course, it took decades for the professional system to be adopted by all the major journalistic media. The first half of the twentieth century is replete with owners like the *Chicago Tribune's* Colonel McCormick, who used their newspapers to advocate their fiercely partisan (and, almost always, far-right) views. (McCormick's *Tribune* was so reactionary that when Hitler came to power, the *Tribune's* European correspondent defected to work for the Nazi propaganda service.) And it is also true that the claim of providing neutral and objective news was suspect, if not entirely bogus. Decision-making is an inescapable part of the journalism process, and some values have to be promoted when deciding why one story rates front-page treatment while another is ignored.

Specifically, the realm of professional journalism had three distinct biases built into it, biases that remain to this day. First, to remove the controversy connected with the selection of stories, it regarded anything done by official sources, e.g. government officials and prominent public figures, as the basis for legitimate news. This gave those in political office (and, to a lesser extent, business) considerable power to set the news agenda by what they spoke about and what they kept quiet about. It gave the news a very establishment and mainstream feel. Second, also to avoid controversy, professional journalism posited that there had to be a news hook or a news peg to justify a news story. This meant that crucial social issues like racism or environmental degradation fell through the cracks of journalism unless there was some event, like a demonstration or the release of an official report, to justify coverage. So journalism tended to downplay or eliminate the presentation of a range of informed positions on controversial issues. This produces a paradox: journalism which, in theory, should inspire political involvement tends to strip politics of meaning and promote a broad depoliticization.

Both of these factors helped to stimulate the birth and rapid rise of the public-relations (PR) industry, the purpose of which was surreptitiously to take advantage of these two aspects of professional journalism. By providing slick press releases, paid-for “experts,” ostensibly neutral-sounding but bogus citizens groups, and canned news events, crafty PR agents have been able to shape the news to suit the interests of their mostly corporate clientele. Or as Alex Carey, the pioneering scholar of PR, put it, the role of PR is to so muddle the public sphere as to “take the risk out of democracy” for the wealthy and corporations. PR is welcomed by media owners, as it provides, in effect, a subsidy for them by providing them with filler at no cost. Surveys show that PR accounts for anywhere from 40 to 70 percent of what appears as news.

The third bias of professional journalism is more subtle but most important: far from being politically neutral, it smuggles in values conducive to the commercial aims of the owners and advertisers as well as the political aims of the owning class. Ben Bagdikian, author of *The Media Monopoly*, refers to this as the “dig here, not there” phenomenon. So it is that crime stories and stories about royal families and celebrities become legitimate news. (These are inexpensive to cover and they never antagonize people in power.) So it is that the affairs of government are subjected to much closer scrutiny than the affairs of big business. And of government activities, those that serve the poor (e.g., welfare) get much more critical attention than those that serve primarily the interests of the wealthy (e.g., the CIA and other institutions of the national security state), which are strictly off-limits. The genius of professionalism in journalism is that it tends to make journalists oblivious to the compromises with authority they routinely make.

Professional journalism hit its high water mark in the United States from the 1950s into the 1980s. During this era, journalists had relative autonomy to pursue stories and considerable resources to use to pursue their craft. But there were distinct limitations. Even at its best, professionalism was biased toward the status quo. The general rule in professional journalism is this: if the elite, the upper 1 or 2 percent of society who control most of the capital and rule the largest institutions, agree on an issue then it is off-limits to journalistic scrutiny. Hence, the professional news media invariably take it as a given that the United States has a right to invade any country it wishes for whatever reason it may have. While the U.S. elite may disagree on specific invasions, none disagrees with the notion that the U.S. military needs to enforce capitalist interests worldwide. Similarly, U.S. professional journalism equates the spread of “free markets” with the spread of democracy, although empirical data show this to be nonsensical. To the U.S. elite, however, democracy is defined by their ability to maximize profit in a nation, and that is, in effect, the standard of professional journalism. In sum, on issues such as these, U.S. professional journalism, even at its best, serves a propaganda function similar to the role of *Pravda* or *Izvestia* in the old USSR.

The best journalism of the professional era came (and still comes) in the alternative scenarios: when there were debates within the elite or when an issue was irrelevant to elite concerns. So important social issues, like civil rights or abortion rights or conflicts between Republicans and Democrats (such as Watergate), tended to get superior coverage to issues of class or imperialism, like the weakening of progressive income taxation, the size and scope of the CIA's operations, or U.S.-sponsored mass murder in Indonesia. But one should not exaggerate the amount of autonomy journalists had from the interests of owners, even in this "golden age." In every community there was a virtual Sicilian Code of silence, for example, regarding the treatment of the area's wealthiest and most powerful individuals and corporations. Media owners wanted their friends and business pals to get nothing but kid-gloves treatment in their media and so it was, except for the most egregious and boneheaded maneuver.

The professional autonomy of U.S. journalism, limited as it was, came under sustained attack in the 1980s and after nearly two decades is only a shell of its former self. The primary reason for this is that, beginning in the 1980s, the relaxation of federal ownership regulations and new technologies made vastly larger media conglomerates economically feasible and, indeed, mandatory. Today some seven or eight firms dominate the U.S. media system, owning all the major film studios, music companies, TV networks, cable TV channels and much, much else. Another fifteen or so companies round out the system; between them they own the overwhelming preponderance of media that Americans consume. As nearly all the traditional news media became small parts of vast commercial empires, owners logically cast a hard gaze at their news divisions and determined to generate the same sort of return from them that they received from their film, music, and amusement park divisions. This meant laying off reporters, closing down bureaus, using more free PR material, emphasizing inexpensive trivial stories, focusing on news of interest to desired upscale consumers and investors, and generally urging a journalism more closely tuned to the bottom-line needs of advertisers and the parent corporation. The much-ballyhooed separation of church and state was sacrificed on the altar of profit.

This has meant that all the things professional journalism did poorly in its heyday, it does even worse today. And those areas where it had been adequate or, at times, more than adequate, have suffered measurably. Empirical studies chronicle the decline of journalism in numbing detail. Perhaps the most striking indication of the collapse of professional journalism comes from the editors and reporters themselves. As recently as the mid 1980s, professional journalists tended to be stalwart defenders of the media status quo, and they wrote book after book of war stories celebrating their vast accomplishments. Today the thoroughgoing demoralization of journalists is striking and palpable. One need only go to a bookstore to see title after title by prominent journalists lamenting the decline of the craft due to corporate and commercial pressure. As Jim Squires, former editor of the *Chicago Tribune* put it, our generation has witnessed the "death of journalism."

Journalism as Ideological Class Warfare

All of this suggests that contemporary journalism poses a severe problem for the left and democratic forces. It is the class bias that is the biggest obstacle. In the 1940s, most medium- and large-circulation daily newspapers had fulltime labor-beat reporters, sometimes several of them. The coverage was not necessarily favorable to the labor movement, but it existed. Today there are less than ten fulltime labor reporters in the media; coverage of working-class economic issues has all but ceased to exist in the news. Conversely, mainstream news and "business news" have effectively morphed over the past two decades as the news is increasingly pitched to the richest one-half or one-third of the population. The affairs of Wall Street, the pursuit of profitable investments, and the joys of capitalism are now presented as the interests of the general population. Journalists rely on business or "free market"-loving, business-oriented think tanks as sources when covering economics stories.

The dismal effects of this became clear in 1999 and 2000 when there were enormous demonstrations in Seattle and Washington, D. C. to protest meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Here, finally, was the news hook that would permit journalists to examine what may be the most pressing political issues of our time. The coverage was skimpy, and paled by comparison to the round-the-clock treatment of the John F. Kennedy, Jr., plane crash. News coverage of the demonstrations tended to emphasize property damage and violence and, even there, it downplayed the activities of the police. There were, to be fair, some outstanding pieces produced by the corporate media, but those were the exceptions to the rule. The handful of good reports that did appear were lost in the continuous stream of procapitalist pieces. In addition to relying upon probusiness sources, it is worth noting that media firms are also among the leading beneficiaries of these global capitalist trade deals, which helps explain why their coverage of them throughout the 1990s was so decidedly enthusiastic. The sad truth is that the closer a story gets to corporate power and corporate domination of our society, the less reliable the corporate news media are.

It is also worth noting that the WTO demonstrations launched a troubling degeneration of media coverage of large public demonstrations that grew worse in Washington in April 2000 and at the Republican and Democratic conventions this summer. By the time of the conventions, demonstrators were being ignored altogether in the press or treated with contempt. As police in Philadelphia and Los Angeles effectively terminated the right of free

assembly for Americans, the corporate news media regurgitated the press releases of the police and of the spinmeisters inside the convention halls. Even by the deplorable standard of news coverage of antiwar demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s, this was a striking lack of concern for the termination of elementary civil liberties.

In recent years, this increased focus by the commercial news media on the more affluent part of the population has reinforced and extended the class bias in the selection and tenor of material. Stories of great importance to tens of millions of Americans will fall through the cracks because those are not the “right” Americans, according to the standards of the corporate news media. Consider, for example, the widening gulf between the richest 10 percent of Americans and the poorest 60 percent of Americans that has taken place over the past two decades. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, real income declined or was stagnant for the lower 60 percent, while wealth and income for the rich skyrocketed. By 1998, discounting home ownership, the top 10 percent of the population claimed 76 percent of the nation’s net worth, and more than half of that is accounted for by the richest 1 percent. The bottom 60 percent has only a minuscule share of total wealth, aside from some home ownership; by any standard, the lowest 60 percent is economically insecure, weighed down as it is by very high levels of personal debt.

As Lester Thurow notes, this peacetime rise in class inequality may well be historically unprecedented and is one of the main developments of our age. It has tremendously negative implications for our politics, culture, and social fabric, yet it is barely noted in our journalism—except for rare mentions when the occasional economic report points to it. One could say that this can be explained by the lack of a news peg that would justify coverage, but that is hardly tenable when one considers the cacophony of news media reports on the economic boom of the past decade. In the crescendo of news media praise for the genius of contemporary capitalism, it is almost unthinkable to criticize the economy as deeply flawed. To do so would seemingly reveal one as a candidate for an honorary position in the Flat-Earth Society. The *Washington Post* has gone so far as to describe ours as a nearly “perfect economy.” And it does, indeed, appear more and more perfect the higher one goes up the socioeconomic ladder, which points to the exact vantage point of the corporate news media.

For a related and more striking example, consider one of the most astonishing trends lately, one that receives little more coverage than O. J. Simpson’s boarder Kato Kaelin’s attempts to land a job or a girlfriend: the rise of the prison-industrial complex and the incarceration of huge numbers of people. The rate of incarceration has more than doubled since the late 1980s, and the United States now has five times more prisoners per capita than Canada and seven times more than Western Europe. The United States has 5 percent of the world’s population and 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. Moreover, nearly 90 percent of prisoners are jailed for nonviolent offenses, often casualties of the so-called drug war.

The sheer quantity of prisoners is not even half of it. Recent research suggests that a significant minority of those behind bars may well be innocent. Consider the state of Illinois, where, in the past two decades, more convicted prisoners on death row have been found innocent of murder than have been executed. Or consider the recent published work of the Innocence Project, which has used DNA testing to get scores of murder and rape convictions overturned. In addition, the conditions inside the prisons themselves tend far too often to be reprehensible and grotesque, in a manner that violates any humane notion of legitimate incarceration. It should be highly disturbing and the source of public debate for a free society to have so many people stripped of their rights. Revolutions have been fought and governments have been overthrown for smaller affronts to the liberties of so many citizens. Instead, to the extent that this is a political issue, it is a debate among Democrats and Republicans over who can be “tougher” on crime, hire more police, and build more prisons. Almost overnight, the prison-industrial complex has become a big business and a powerful lobby for public funds.

This is an important story, one thick with drama and excitement, corruption and intrigue. In the past two years, several scholars, attorneys, prisoners, and freelance reporters have provided devastating accounts of the scandalous nature of the criminal justice system, mostly in books published by small, struggling presses. Yet this story is hardly known to Americans who can name half the men Princess Diana had sex with or the richest Internet entrepreneurs. Why is that? Well, consider that the vast majority of prisoners come from the bottom quarter of the population in economic terms. It is not just that the poor commit more crimes; the criminal justice system is also stacked against them. “Blue-collar” crimes generate harsh sentences while “white-collar” crime—almost always netting vastly greater amounts of money—gets kid-gloves treatment by comparison. In 2000, for example, a Texas man received sixteen years in prison for stealing a Snickers candy bar, while, at the same time, four executives at Hoffman-LaRoche Ltd. were found guilty of conspiring to suppress and eliminate competition in the vitamin industry, in what the Justice Department called perhaps the largest criminal antitrust conspiracy in history. The cost to consumers and public health is nearly immeasurable. The four executives were fined anywhere from seventy-five thousand dollars to 350,000 dollars and they received prison terms ranging from three months all the way up to... four months.

Hence, the portion of the population that ends up in jail has little political clout, is least likely to vote, and is of less business interest to the owners and advertisers of the commercial news

media. It is also a disproportionately nonwhite portion of the population, and this is where class and race intersect and form their especially noxious American brew. Some 50 percent of U.S. prisoners are African-American. In other words, these are the sort of people that media owners, advertisers, journalists, and desired upscale consumers do everything they can to avoid, and the news coverage reflects that sentiment. As Barbara Ehrenreich has observed, the poor have vanished from the view of the affluent; they have all but disappeared from the media. And in those rare cases where poor people are covered, studies show that the news media reinforce racist stereotypes, playing into the social myopia of the middle and upper classes. There is ample coverage of crime in the news media, but it is used to provide inexpensive, graphic, and socially trivial filler. The coverage is almost always divorced from any social context or public policy concerns and, if anything, it serves to enhance popular paranoia about crime waves and prod political support for tough-talking, “three strikes and you’re out” programs.

Imagine, for one moment, that instead of being from the bottom quarter, nearly all the prisoners were from the richest quarter of the population. Imagine that the students attending Yale or the University of Illinois, for example, had half of their friends behind bars or dead from a confrontation with police, and that they had been hassled by the police for being “suspects” in some crime. Imagine, too, that their parents had the same experiences, and that they knew that many of those friends in prison were innocent. Imagine the donations the ACLU would receive! Would this be a news story then? Of course it would, but this is hypothetical, because the problem would have been eliminated long before it could have reached that point, and it would have been eliminated because it would have been the biggest political and news story of our era.

Journalism, Media and Democratic Politics

The implications of this for the left and democratic activists are self-evident. We cannot communicate using the dominant means of communication, and our viewpoints—when covered—will tend to be trivialized or distorted. This points to the importance for the left and progressive organizations to redouble their efforts to support independent media. Some argue that with the rise of the Internet, the corporate media system and mainstream journalism will go the way of the dodo bird as billions of media websites offer a sumptuous feast of media. The track record so far, however, makes it clear that this will not happen. To the extent that the Internet becomes part of the commercial media system, it looks to be dominated by the usual corporate suspects. Their power is based not just on technology, but on political and economic muscle. To create and disseminate effective media requires resources and institutional support. Technology won’t rescue us, although we do need to take advantage of it to the best of our abilities.

Ultimately, we need to press for the overhaul of the media system, so that it serves democratic values rather than the interests of capital. The U.S. media system is not “natural,” it has nothing to do with the wishes of the Founding Fathers, and it has even less to do with the workings of some alleged free market. To the contrary, the media system is the result of laws, government subsidies, and regulations made in the public’s name, but made corruptly behind closed doors without the public’s informed consent. The largest media firms are all built on top of the profits generated by government gifts of monopoly rights to valuable broadcasting spectrum or monopoly cable franchises. The value of this corporate welfare, over the past seventy-five years, can only be estimated, but it probably runs into the hundreds of billions of dollars.

Our job is to make media reform part of our broader struggle for democracy, social justice, and, dare we say it, socialism. It is impossible to conceive of a better world with a media system that remains under the thumb of Wall Street and Madison Avenue, under the thumb of the owning class. It is nearly impossible to conceive of the process of getting to a better world without some changes in the media status quo. We have no time to waste.



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