

MONTHLY REVIEW

AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

Dear Reader, we make this and other articles available for free online to serve those unable to afford or access the print edition of *Monthly Review*. If you read the magazine online and can afford a print subscription, we hope you will consider purchasing one. Please visit the MR store for subscription options. Thank you very much. —Eos.



Also in this issue

- September 2008 (Volume 60, Number 4), The Editors
- Jeremiah Wright in the Propaganda System, Edward S. Herman and David Peterson
- Humanitarian Imperialism: The New Doctrine of Imperial Right, Noam Chomsky
- Stately vistas of stately vistas, Marge Piercy
- The Fire Inside, Richard D. Vogel

Subjects

- Ecology
- History
- Imperialism
- Inequality
- Marxism
- Media
- Movements
- Political Economy

The U.S. Media Reform Movement: Going Forward

by Robert W. McChesney

Topics: Media, Movements, Political Economy

(Sep 01, 2008)

All social scholarship ultimately is about understanding the world to change it, even if the change we want is to preserve that which we most treasure in the status quo. This is especially and immediately true for political economy of media as a field of study, where research has a direct and important relationship with policies and structures that shape media and communication and influence the course of society. Because of this, too, the political economy of communication has had a direct relationship with policy makers and citizens outside the academy. The work, more than most other areas, cannot survive if it is "academic." That is why the burgeoning media reform movement in the United States is so important for the field. This is a movement, astonishingly, based almost directly upon core political economic research.

ROBERT W. MCCHESENEY is the Gutsell Endowed Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His books include *Communication Revolution* (New Press, 2007), *The Problem of the Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2004), and *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (University of Illinois, 1999). This is adapted from his most recent, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (Monthly Review, 2008).

The political economy of media is dedicated to understanding the role of media in societies—e.g., whether the media system on balance encourages or discourages social justice, open governance, and effective participatory democracy. The field also examines how market structures, policies and subsidies, and organizational structures shape and determine the nature of the media system and media content. The entire field is based on the explicit understanding that media systems are not natural or inevitable, but they result from crucial political decisions. These political decisions are not made on a blank slate or a level playing field; they are strongly shaped by the historical and political economic context of any given society at any point in time. We make our own media history, to paraphrase Marx, but not exactly as we please. We do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."

For much of the past century there has been a decided split in the political economy of media between U.S. scholars and those based in almost every other nation in the world. In the United States it generally has been assumed, even by critical scholars devoted to social change, that a profit-driven, advertising-supported corporate media system was the only possible system. The media system reflected the nature of the U.S. political economy, and any serious effort to reform the media system would have to necessarily be part of a revolutionary program to overthrow the capitalist political economy. Since that was considered unrealistic, even preposterous, the structure of the media system was regarded as inviolable. The circumstances existing and transmitted from the past allowed for no alternative.

Elsewhere in the world, capitalism was seen as having a less solid grasp on any given society, and the political economy was seen as more susceptible to radical reform. Every bit as important, media systems were regarded as the results of policies, and subject to dramatic variation even within a capitalist political economy. In such a context it was more readily grasped that the nature of the media system would influence the broader political decisions about what sort of economy a society might have. In other words, the political economy not only shaped the nature of the media system, the nature of the media system shaped the broader political economy. Scholars and activists were more likely to understand that winning battles to reconstruct the media system were a necessary part of a broader process to create a more just society, even if the exact reforms being fought for were not especially revolutionary in their own right.

The "academic" nature of the political economy of media in the United States was frustrating for many of us, especially when we saw the way scholars played direct roles in media activism and politics in other nations. For many of us it became maddening at times as we conducted

historical research on media policymaking in the United States. It became increasingly clear that the idea that the corporate commercial system was accepted as “natural” and benevolent was erroneous. At key moments in U.S. history, there had been considerable debate over how to structure the media system, and it was never a foregone conclusion that the system should be turned over to powerful commercial interests to do with as they please. Indeed, my research found that there was considerable opposition to the commercial media status quo, especially in the Progressive Era (1900–15), and the 1930s and 1940s.

A more accurate way to understand the relationship of media to political economy in the United States in the decades since the 1940s was that because the system seemed entrenched, because it seemed to have no discernible opposition, it was assumed that it was simply a “given.” Our research on the United States tended to demonstrate how closely linked the media system was to the needs of those atop the status quo; the point of the research was seen as providing intellectual self-defense, with no notion of playing offense. For political struggles over media, those of us who studied the political economy of media tended to concentrate upon struggles in other nations for a more equitable media system, because that was where the issues were in play. We often looked at the role the U.S. government played to undermine legitimate democratic aspirations via the media (and much else) in other nations.

This is not to say that there was not a certain amount of activism over media policy issues in the generations connecting the Second World War to the new century. But the policymaking process was corrupt and dominated by commercial interests. Politicians were in the pocket of industry, and there was no press coverage so nearly all of the public was in the dark. Media was a non-issue. So the television system was gift-wrapped and hand-delivered to Wall Street and Madison Avenue without a shred of public awareness and participation. The same thing happened with FM radio and cable and satellite television. There was very little public participation during these years, except for moments during the 1970s when popular organizing around black power and women’s rights spilled over slightly to the media realm. Even then the most radical reform proposals barely threatened corporate dominance of the media system.

We hit rock bottom with the Reagan years and the advent of full-throttle neoliberalism in the 1980s. Communication was an area Wall Street and the political right had zeroed in on as being exhibit A in their campaign to have corporate interests flower and the notion of the public interest become eviscerated. Soon all that remained to conduct public interest organizing on media issues were a handful of very small shops in Washington, with almost no staff, no budget, and no popular awareness or support. These groups battled their best, but the range of outcomes was narrow. The overwhelming bipartisan support for the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, regarded as the Magna Carta for communication corporations at the time, was the logical culmination of this process.

Not surprisingly, in such a hostile political climate, political economists of media in the United States began to lose their muster by the 1990s. If the system was unchangeable and reflected the will of the people, what was the point of studying its flaws, except to torture oneself. The field began to decline. From being among the most dynamic areas in media research in the 1970s and early 1980s, it gravitated toward obscurity.

At the same time, though, beneath the radar of academia, mainstream media, and the official political culture, something was happening. Driven by research by the likes of Ben Bagdikian, Noam Chomsky, and Edward Herman, and journalism by Alexander Cockburn, Jeff Cohen, and Norman Solomon, a burgeoning and sophisticated popular critique of the limitations of the media system for self-government began to spill past academic classrooms into the broader community. The linkages between the needs of the wealthy and powerful and the nature of what was covered and how it was covered in the mainstream media—the contours of legitimate debate—became more apparent. For citizens and activists the critique was like setting a match to a gas canister: if the media system was inhospitable to democracy and social justice and we were serious about democracy and social justice, we had to change the media system.

So it was during the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s a grassroots media reform movement was born. It was signified by groups like Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) and the two Media & Democracy conferences organized by Don Hazen in 1996 and 1997. It was demonstrated by the increased interest in media critique and issues in progressive publications like *The Nation*, *In These Times*, *Monthly Review*, and *The Progressive*. But in the dispirited political times there was still little sense that we could do very much to change the situation. For a while, though, there was a certain momentum built upon the fact that people understood they were not alone in their concerns about media, that they were not insane.

And it was not simply people on the political left who were alarmed by developments in the media. If radical critics had zeroed in on the weaknesses and biases of mainstream journalism in the best of times, by the 1990s it was obvious that we were heading toward the worst of times. With the concentration of ownership and the weakening of labor, the informal commitment by commercial media organizations to canons of professional journalism—as flawed as they were in some respects—experienced commercial and at times political stress. Editorial staffs were downsized, bureaus closed, and there was a softening of news standards to include more salacious and trivial material. Working journalists themselves made a fairly rapid transition from being the most stalwart defenders of the status quo to among its leading

critics. More broadly, the spread of commercialism (and with it, vulgarity) throughout the media culture was disturbing to many not on the left. In short popular acceptance of the media system was weakening.

Looking back to that ancient history from today's vantage point, we can now see that during these years the current media reform movement was enjoying a necessary "pre-history," much like the civil rights movement in the 1940s and early 1950s, of the environmental movement in the 1960s. The tipping point came early in the new decade when the connection was made between the nature of the media system and a variety of policies and subsidies that created it. The anti-globalization movement triggered by the 1999 Seattle WTO protests organically pushed people to media activism, as the expansion of commercial media and its "rah-rah business" journalism was so central to the process. The Big Lies protecting the corporate media system—that the United States had a free market media system, and that this was the system ordained as the only possible democratic one by the Founders in the Constitution—began to crumble. Certainly the United States had a profit-driven media system, but it was not the result of free markets. It was the result of policies made corruptly to the benefit of corporate interests behind closed doors. The Founders themselves had implemented enormous printing and postal subsidies to spawn a vibrant press; they were under no illusions that a free press could be generated by letting rich people try to make as much money as possible in publishing and hoping you lucked out.

The specific issue that vaulted media reform to movement status came with the media ownership fight of 2003. The Federal Communications Commission was required by the 1996 Telecommunications Act to review the existing media ownership rules every two years, and it had fallen behind schedule. These rules limited the number of government-granted monopoly broadcast licenses a single firm could own, locally and nationally. They also put limits on how much other media, specifically newspapers, a company receiving the gift of a monopoly broadcast license to public-owned airwaves could own. The spirit behind these rules was to have as much ownership diversity as possible. The long-standing rules were popular with everyone, except the big media conglomerates that were salivating at the thought of expanding and lessening competitive pressures.

These ownership rules were so popular that even in the Reagan era they could only be loosened by the FCC. But with George W. Bush at the helm, the big media firms went in for the kill. Many of them, like Murdoch's News Corporation, Clear Channel, and Belo Corp., had been ardent supporters of Bush in his quest for the presidency in 2000, and they were leading the fight to eliminate the ownership rules. The three Bush appointments to the five-member FCC all made clear their support for the relaxation of the media ownership rules even before any research had been done, and they had the votes to pass the reforms they wanted. With Congress also under Republican control the matter looked all but lost in the spring of 2003.

This was when the opposition to the proposed relaxation of the media ownership rules exploded, seemingly out of thin air. Within a year at least two million people, maybe more, had contacted the FCC and Congress to protest the relaxation of the rules. The protests came from across the political spectrum and for a variety of reasons; anger against the media coverage of the buildup to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was certainly a large factor. Years of bottled up frustration with media came bursting forth when people gained the recognition that our media system was not natural, but the result of policies and subsidies that had been made in their name but without their informed consent. The contemporary U.S. media reform movement was born.

In the five-plus years since the ownership battle the movement has grown dramatically. It is no longer the province of a handful of activists operating in near total obscurity in Washington, with little public awareness or conscious support. It is uniting the grassroots with the policymaking process. I cofounded a group, Free Press, in December 2002 with John Nichols and Josh Silver. Free Press had only a few staffers in 2003. In the spring of 2008 Free Press had a staff of thirty-five, and a membership approaching 400,000. Although Free Press is the largest media reform group in the United States, there are numerous others, and many of them emerged since 2003. A full listing along with descriptions of the 165 U.S. organizations working on media reform can be located at www.freepress.net. Some two dozen of these media reform groups came together to establish the Media & Democracy Coalition in 2005. A significant element of the media reform movement also characterizes itself as the media justice movement, because it links issues of media specifically with questions of social justice, in particular as they apply to women and communities of color. Locally based media reform groups are forming all the time.

There are several distinguishing characteristics between the emerging media reform movement and the media activism conducted prior to 2003 in the United States. First, although media ownership and battling media concentration is the issue that galvanized the movement, several other issues have come into play subsequently. Free Press has led a coalition fight under the Save the Internet banner to preserve Network Neutrality on the Internet; that is, to stop the cable and telephone companies from effectively privatizing the Internet by deciding which Web sites travel at the fastest speeds. Likewise coalitions have fought the efforts of the Bush administration to generate fake news and otherwise subvert freedom of the press. And similar coalitions battled to protect public and community broadcasting from sharp cutbacks in 2005. Looking forward there are numerous important

policy issues in play or on the horizon. Each of these issues brings different constituencies into the movement; our job is to get them to see that they have a stake in all the other media reform issues that exist as well. It is not too much to say that the course of the digital communication system will be determined to a large extent by the outcome of these fights.

Second, the goal of the media reform movement is simply to make media policy a political issue. Once the matter is debated in the light of day, there will be progressive outcomes. The strength of the corporate status quo was not that it was so popular or democratic, but, rather, that it cultivated the notion that there was no alternative to the status quo; it had been mandated by the Founding Fathers, Adam Smith, or God, or some combination thereof. Once it became clear that that was purely propagandistic, and the media system was subjected to a clear-eyed analysis, the debate shifted radically. This is the moment we are in now, where millions of Americans understand that there is nothing natural about the media system and they have a right and a responsibility to participate in policy deliberations.

This, too, has been the source of major victories for the media reform movement. As a result of its work, Congress required the FCC to hold six public hearings around the nation in 2006 and 2007 before making any changes in the media ownership rules. The FCC has also agreed to hold public hearings in 2008 on the future of the Internet, due to activist pressure. In 2008, too, Representative Edward Markey (D-Mass.) and Chip Pickering (R-Miss.) co-sponsored the Internet Freedom Act, legislation that not only calls for Network Neutrality but requires the FCC to hold a minimum of eight major public "broadband summits" across the nation on the future of the Internet. This is all revolutionary, the democratization of media policymaking, and it may be the one great contribution of the movement to activists working in other areas of public life.

Third, although the media reform movement concentrates upon policy activism, it is closely linked to groups creating independent media, which has exploded on the Internet, and to those who provide criticism of the mainstream media. Those doing independent media need success in the policy realm to assure they have a possibility to be effective while those doing criticism and educational work do so with the ultimate aim of changing the system. The three branches of media activism rise and fall together. And all of them are dependent upon strong relations with media workers in the corporate sector, who increasingly find themselves estranged from the needs and values of their owners. Hence the struggle for trade unions representing media workers is a core demand of the media reform movement. As we are discovering today in the United States in the struggle to keep newspaper journalism alive, it is the newspaper unions alone within the system that have a clear stake in seeing that viable journalism exist. The conglomerate owners could not care less.

Fourth, the United States, which was the global laggard in media activism for decades, has become something of a leader. Activists from other nations now attend the periodic media reform conference sponsored by Free Press to get up to speed on developments in the United States. By 2007 Canadians were beginning to work on establishing an organization similar in scope to Free Press. In the coming years it will be crucial that activists not only develop their movements in their own nations, but that they continue to coordinate their labors, as so many of the issues are global and revolve around trade and economic regulatory policies.

How far the U.S. media reform movement can go as a global leader is uncertain. Although the movement is nonpartisan and attracts support from elements of the political right, in the final analysis its success depends upon the growth and rise in power of popular political forces, i.e., the political left. These forces are weak and largely inchoate in the United States. Ultimately, the battle over media is about whether people or corporations, public interest or private profit, should rule the realm of communication. And in view of the centrality of communication to the political economy that increasingly leads to the question of who should direct all of society. This means at some point a direct confrontation with capital. An emergent left supporting progressive media reform is much easier to see in places like Latin America, Africa, or even Europe where capitalism is less stable or where a stronger left has traditionally existed. Some of the appeal of media reform movement in the United States is that by blasting open the media it will make it possible for progressive media to have a chance to succeed and contribute to generating a stronger and more vibrant political culture, which likely will mean a rejuvenated left.

No one thinks any longer that media reform is an issue to solve "after the revolution." Everyone understands that without media reform, there will be no revolution. In that sense it is similar to the labor movement, where the demand for free trade unions, hardly revolutionary in its own right, is a necessary precondition to building a viable organized left that can contest for power. Even if we do not get the revolution in the United States, media reform much like organized labor can make the nation a more just and humane place, for its own inhabitants and the peoples of the world.

What should be evident is that the emergence of the U.S. media reform movement has been of incalculable value for political economists of media. In each of the areas mentioned above political economy has played a constructive role and before it lay myriad opportunities for research and public engagement. As a subfield, political economy of media was an area on respirators in the 1990s when the thrall of neoliberalism deemed the market the natural ruler of all things existing and made critical research appear scholastic and irrelevant. The Internet had magically "solved" the problem of the media so we could all shutter our windows and

had ingeniously solved the problem of the media, so we could all shatter our windows and track down new professions. In the span of a mere decade those propositions were turned on their heads. Today we understand that media systems are the result of complex political economic factors and crucial policy decisions. The need for engaged scholarship has never been more pronounced, in the United States and worldwide. This is our moment in the sun, our golden opportunity, and as political economists of the media we must seize it.



2008, Volume 60, Issue 04 (September)

Connect

Subscribe to the Monthly Review e-newsletter (max of 1-3 per month).

    

< Stately vistas of stately vistas

Humanitarian Imperialism: The New Doctrine of Imperial Right >