

The Mediarchy:

Commercial TV and the Conquest of the American Mind

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by

Jerry M. Landay

A Book Proposal

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"If I were permitted to write all the ballads, I need not  
care who makes the laws of the nation."

- Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher, 1704 -

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"If I loosed the reins on the press, I would not stay in  
power three months."

- Napoleon -

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Taking a Measure of  
THE MEDIARCHY

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How many corporate Mediarchs are expected to dominate American mass  
telemedia early in the new Millenium? .. 4 to 6  
[Eli Noam, Director, Columbia Univ. Institute of Tele-Information]

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What percentage of American homes own television sets? . . 99 per cent  
[Nielsen Media Research, Nov, 1993]

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How many television sets do Americans purchase yearly? 25 to 40 million  
[Nielsen]

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What percentage of American children have TV sets in their rooms? . . 54  
per cent  
[Nielsen]

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How many acts of violence are committed on all broadcast and cable  
television on a given day? . . 2,605  
[Content analysis, Center for Media and Public Affairs, Apr.1994]

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By 1987, what percentage of children's toys sold in America were based  
on cartoon characters licensed by toymakers from commercial TV? . . 70  
per cent

[Out of the Garden, Kline/Verso, 1996]

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Of 50 television station newscasts in major markets monitored on a day  
in October of 1996, how many carried news of state, local, and municipal  
election campaigns? . . 0

[Rocky Mountain Media Watch]

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How many Americans watch some portion of public television program  
offerings weekly? . . 90 million

[Corporation for Public Broadcasting]

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After Speaker Newt Gingrich called for the "zeroing out" of public  
broadcasting, what percentage of Americans opposed his stand? . . 65%  
[Louis Harris and Associates]

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How much per capita does the U.S. Government spend on public  
broadcasting? . . \$1.06

[Corporation for Public Broadcasting]

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How much per capita does Japan spend for public broadcasting? . . \$17.71  
[ Twentieth Century Fund]

A BOOK PROPOSAL

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Readership: General readers, professionals; an academic supplementary text

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ABOUT THE BOOK

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THE REIGN OF THE NINE BUDDIES

Television reigns. And, increasingly, television rules, in a world largely shaped by media hooplah. It is a world ill-lit by a light that has failed. In 1995, Madeline Levine, a psychologist who works with troubled children in San Francisco, encountered a senior TV production executive. She told him about a book she was writing on the effects of heavy commercial television viewing by young patients. "Can we talk about this?" she asked. His reply stunned her: "I don't have to talk to you about this. You don't have any power. And as long as you don't have any power, me and my eight buddies will decide what kids see on television. And you can't do anything about it."

Little has been done to temper the enormous influence of those nine "buddies," mostly male, over the lives of adults as well as their children. Virtually all commercial television programs on American broadcast networks are made by the major Hollywood studio combines -- Universal/MCA, Warner, Twentieth-Century Fox, Columbia, MGM and Paramount -- and network-based combines -- NBC, CBS and ABC/Disney. They own or control a growing number of production entities that manufacture content for cable and direct-broadcast satellite. The "nine buddies" are also the major distributors of program content to television systems overseas.

They constitute a virtual Ministry of Culture, Information and Propaganda. Television is their principal business. Their power goes well beyond *Roseanne*, *Seinfeld*, *NYPD Blue*, and *The New Dating Game*. It is an enormously profitable, private business. Yet, it has unique public consequences, operates over the public broadcast spectrum, and by cable over public rights-of-way, yet with diminishing obligations either to the government organs designated to regulate them, or to the People, whom they are by statute and by covenant supposed to serve. The "nine buddies" are

the spearhead of a new kind of social governance -- with unique private access to the public mind.

To the Mediarchy falls the ultimate power: to influence the way we perceive our world. Today," writes novelist and semiologist Umberto Eco, "a country belongs to the persons who control its communications."

#### THE NEW HIERARCHY: MEDIARCHY

There's an unprecedented effort by a compact mass of media conglomerates to expand holdings across the multimedia horizon reaching audiences of many millions. These media interests meld into one another at a pace without precedent, largely involving the telemedia -- television and radio. Between 1995 and 1996 alone, the total purchase prices of announced media mergers and acquisitions broke all records, hovering around \$100 billion! These consolidations continue. None have seriously been challenged by antitrust enforcers, who are supposedly charged with curbing the excessive accumulation of power by business through undue market domination and restraint of trade. Yet these novel monopolies over the flow of culture, information and ideas pose far more serious dangers to a democratic society than those business baronies of yore whose efforts to corner material markets of oil, sugar, steel and chemicals at the turn of the century inspired the Sherman and Clayton Acts. Today, telemedia's barons attempt to corner the most precious human gift next to life itself -- consciousness.

Stage one in the evolution of megamedia conglomeration was the commodification of American broadcasting at the dawn of the radio age in the late 1920s. Leading European nations were defining the value of radio to the national interest. "As we conceive it," said John Reith in founding Great Britain's non-profit BBC, "our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavor or achievement." In the same period, communications corporations in America were engineering a self-serving system of broadcasting that stamps its consuming character upon the United States: the destiny of American telemedia since then would be to sell things, and to maintain the habits of consuming them. In the 1950s, without discussion or debate, American television embraced the radio model.

Stage two, the consolidation of media monopoly, began in the early 1980s. At the time, 50 corporations controlled half or more of American media businesses. By 1986, the number had been nearly halved to 30 or so. The Reagan Administration embraced a concerted industry campaign to emphasize the deregulation of the broadcasting and cable industries. In the Clinton-Gore years, deregulation of television and radio has devolved into a mighty implosion of acquisition and convergence. As concentration

intensified, the range of content choices and information flow shriveled. Most American television -- 24 hours of it every day -- is made and distributed by less than a dozen content factories. Eli Noam of Columbia University's Institute of Tele-Information anticipates "the inexorable march of telecommunications to a world of four or five giant players." Can democracy withstand a procession such as this?

It seems appropriate to call this dwindling roster of ever-larger, interlocking, cross-pollinating media conglomerates *The Mediarchy*, from the Greek *arkhia*, meaning "rule." Within *hierarchy* in its original, medieval sense, the suffix alluded to the ruling structure of the Catholic Church. The Mediarchy of our time governs a secular "church" of commercial television, its electronic altars penetrating virtually every home, and now spilling over into public spaces -- airports, airplanes, waiting rooms, restaurants, and restrooms, demonstrably marking for each of us the ubiquitous spread of a direct pipeline to the public mind.

The Mediarchy is an ad hoc confederation of communications enterprises that are less corporations than the expressions of a handful of motivated men, "centrally manufacturing symbolic and cultural environments" across America, extending ineffably into space over other continents and oceans. They are not demarcated in Rand-McNally atlases. But they transform the democratic nature of the nation-states that the atlases delimit.

#### THE UNIVERSE OF MEDIARCHY

*Mediarchs* directly influence the opinions, tastes, agendas and interests of the public mind daily through their quasi-public businesses. Their motives are largely self-serving. Through television, the Mediarchy, has succeeded in becoming America's principal educator, storyteller, time waster, trend-setter, political gatekeeper, as well as surrogate parent, conditioning "little consumers" from the playpen to the classroom. Though the electronic universe is boundless, the cultural universe of the Mediarchy is reductionist, shrinking life to an odd-lots basement of sitcomery, celebrity, police chases, news as amusement, sports as slam-dunks, and social dysfunction by soap-opera.

Beyond serving as the engine of so-called "popular" culture, commercial television is the model and cash cow for the Mediarchy's collectives of broadcast and cable networks, affiliated stations and cable systems, newspaper, magazine and print publishers, film and recording companies, theme parks and sports teams, with crosslinks to each other and to cloned Web pages and computer networks.

THE EXCESSES OF MEDIARCHY

Mediarchy underwrites one of the most influential lobbies in the Capital. Its influence has been used to accrue still more. Its hold over TV-dependents in the Congress literally conveys from lawmakers to lobbyists the writing of many of the telecommunications provisions and rules that ostensibly spur competition, but which actually choke it. Through its enormous influence, Mediarchs have been granted the supreme gift of corporate welfare: the award of multiple advanced digital channels, with no payback required -- either in the form of licensing fees to the public treasury, or repayments in service to the public interest. Thus, the Mediarchy is insulated from obligatory paybacks that not even influential cigarette, pharmaceutical, trucking, or airline interests have managed to evade.

The Mediarchy has abolished the 'fairness doctrine,' the last, modest assurance of wide-ranging public discourse on the "public" air on issues of public importance. It has ignored public clamor for political campaign reform, and systematically derailed efforts to get big political money off television, together with the political ads it underwrites. And it has shunned efforts to promote an informed, civil society through responsible journalism.

It has largely evaded controls against sex and violence on the air, weakened guidelines for better children's programming, gutted a rudimentary ratings system empowering parental choice, defeated attempts to limit the frequency and length of television ads, and deserted a voluntary 40-year ban against liquor advertising. In Congress and the federal courts, it has gained unprecedented legislative and legal advantage over competitors. It has censored news coverage of these significant matters in their broadcasts.

Since the 1980s, the men who run America's expanding mass telemedia empires are the beneficiaries the greatest giveaway of public resource in American history, the imposition of *laissez-faire* market doctrine on vital legal process, the resulting ideological and political sabotage of antitrust enforcement, the weakening of effective government oversight, the expropriation of the First Amendment, once a public right, into a corporate shield, and exclusivity over new communications technologies.

BEWITCHED, BOTHERED AND BEWILDERED

Where are the People? Bewitched, bothered and bewildered. They are vaguely concerned, but also, largely passive, because they are disinformed by the Mediarchy, their scholars, their critics, and their politicians on the issues arising from the ascent of Mediarchy. And they are bewitched by the persistence of television's amusing bright glare. The Mediarchy is held free

from accountability by the inherent attribute of the TV medium to distract. Despite its public transparency, the tele-screen is essentially opaque to most viewers as an instrument of social power and control.

In short, the unique source of the immense power of the Mediarchy is -- its private monopoly over the endowments of television itself.

The American Teleculture, as governed by a corporate Mediarchy, is anti-democratic. Its closed telemedia system stifles the free flow of ideas and information on which an open society depends. Run solely as a business, it offers tightly controlled program fare that fogs the cultural environment. It restricts political access to telemedia to those who can pay for it. This is oligarchy, not democracy. Yet television, in E.B. White's phrase, can serve as a "saving radiance in the sky" when used as an instrument of public business dedicated to the nurture of a civil society.

The democratization of the American telemedia system is a prerequisite for the maintenance of an open society. As a colleague wrote, "As long as we have the current media system, progressive social change is going to be vastly more difficult, if not impossible." Unless citizens are encouraged to become literate about the mass telemedia, they will find it increasingly difficult to remain literate about much else.

#### VITAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MEDIARCHY

This book is dedicated to the restoration of the vision in television, and to changes in policymaking that will make this happen. It will address questions that go well beyond the one most frequently raised about the power of television: "Anything good on tonight?" Some of them are:

-- What is the Mediarchy, and who constitutes its membership? What's the nature of their relationship?

-- From what sources do they derive their power and influence? What is the precise nature and purpose of the business in which they engage?

-- What are the origins of Mediarchy; what elements of the past help explain its present and future?

-- What are the unique characteristics of the television medium, and how is its inherent eloquence used -- and misused?

-- How does the consumer-capitalist system affect the content of commercial television? How can there be a more effective economic critique of TV content?

-- How does commercial television interact with other vital sectors of American life? How does it affect our political and our cultural lives?

-- What is the influence wielded by the Mediarchy on the evolution of the so-called "electronic, information revolution?"

And, as important as all these: Should mass communications, a quasi-public business, be wholly run as a business at all? What might a system look like that is balanced between private, commercial use and a dedicated public telecommunications universe? What policies and regulations are needed to honor the social, cultural and human stakes in democratic mass communications?

THE MEDIARCHY: THE CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAN MIND

...is a narrative essay that will offer thoughtful and provocative answers to these questions for a wide, general audience of readers who use television, and who parent children who do. It will raise the awareness of a wide general readership to the rise of corporate Mediarchy. It will also be of value to students in a wide variety of fields and studies that television intersects and profoundly affects. It will aim to stimulate the vigorous public discussion and debate in which America has yet to engage, in the seven decades since the advent of radio, on the uses, abuses, and potential of broadcast technology in service to the public interest.

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Jerry M. Landay

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Revised Chapter Outline  
(subject to amendment)

Introduction -- Pilgrimage Through A Personal Telescope

"Mr. Landay, what can you bring to broadcasting that broadcasting doesn't already have?"  
-Dr. Ken Bartlett, teacher-advocate of education by radio, 1947-

This is a biographical sampler that introduces the author as well as the major theses of the book. His call to vocation merges the pragmatic with the ideal: recognition and reward through service to the public interest, the now abandoned standard of American broadcasting. The personal call to vocation comes to a high school student at a local radio station on V-J Day, 1945, and transports the author through several brushes with near disaster to a career in electronic journalism, culminating at a fading CBS in the '80s: Murrow's icon is turned to the wall, as corporate imperatives overwhelm Paley's "Tiffany" of broadcast news.

The author serves as a newsroom executive and news correspondent at Westinghouse Broadcasting, ABC-News and CBS-News -- through five presidential campaigns, Vietnam, Watergate, Three Mile Island. Creators of original content and believers in the service model of broadcasting are overwhelmed by the rise of megamedia structure and a sales-marketing culture, as commercial television spearheads an emergent Teleculture. A vital public industry of ideas is submerged in the marketing of "stuff."

Chapter One -- Nine Buddies: The New Telemedia Order

"The only truth you know is what you get over this tube. Right now, there is a whole, an entire generation that never knew anything that didn't come out of this tube."

-- Fictional anchorman Howard Beale in Paddy Chayefsky's movie Network, 1976 --

An overview introducing the Mediarchy and its private instrument of power and influence, commercial television. The chapter defines and describes Mediarchy, identifies its principal members, and charts the interlocking and overlapping nature of its holdings. The Mediarchy employs the rhetoric of competition, but, behind its cover, constructs an all-embracing monopoly over the public mind that swallows the "multimedia revolution."

The chapter examines the narrow purposes of a potentially boundless medium, television, including the principal business of the Mediarchy: the sale of "eyeballs" to high corporate bidders. It introduces the concept of commercial television content as the most powerful force in daily American life. Television values

are dispersed across the entire Teleculture, from books and newspapers to movies, as the commercial telemedia cease reflecting society and begin shaping it. The chapter introduces the unique influence of the broadcasting lobby on policy and politics. It scans the failure of print media and media critics to attend to what is happening. Television the medium is not "junk," as Postman maintains with an unthoughtful pen, but much of its commercial content is. Criticism that confuses medium and content, and avoids an economic critique, clouds the issue and blunts public understanding of the crisis telemedia won't cover.

The role of the Mediarchy is considered within an encroaching, corporate state.

## Chapter II -- The Commercial Conquest of the Air

No other lobby in this budget-balancing era can proudly point to such a taxpayer rip-off, worth billions. It's like giving Yellowstone Park to timber companies.

- Columnist Bill Safire in *The New York Times*, 7/23/97 -

This chapter samples history for an insight to the origins of mass communications, and its dynamic linkages to the power of governance.

The American corporations in the age of mass electric communications learn during the radio "boom" of the 1920s what the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, Henry VIII, and Martin Luther understood in earlier communications "revolutions:" dominating the conversation of the culture is the key to influence. In the age of Teleculture, transmitting a single message to a large body of public opinion in the same instant, repeating it, and limiting access to the distribution networks magnifies that influence to a degree unrivaled in history.

Marconi, the Father of Radio, misses the point that his American rivals understand about the medium: not a tool of point-to-point messaging, but of the accumulation of mass. The commercial take-over of the American air follows the refinement of radio technology during the Great War, and springs from a union between government and industry -- the military-industrial complex. The U.S. Navy's bid to monopolize domestic radio fails, but it serves as midwife to the birth of corporate telemedia. In the takeover of the machinery of regulation by the fledgling telecommunications industry, amateur broadcasters, educators, and social advocates lose a mammoth struggle for a significant place in the broadcast spectrum.

The proto-Mediarch Col. Robert McCormick, the Chicago publisher and broadcaster, is the architect of commercial multimedia "synergy" between the electron and print. In Washington, his lawyer Lewis Caldwell pioneers lobbying strategies that assure the uniquely commercial nature of the

American telemedia system. Edward L. Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud and "father" of public relations, weds masscomm technology to "applied social science" in the engineering of mass consent for business and political purposes. The stage is set for Mediarchy.

### Chapter III - The Mediarchy: A Turn to the Right

"I admit it -- the liberal media were never that powerful, and the whole thing was often used by conservatives for conservative failures."

- William Kristol, editor of conservative Rupert Murdoch's magazine *The Standard*, exploding the myth of "the liberal media" -

The Mediarchy is the heir of stunning union: mass-media communications technology, consumer capitalism, and the rise of the corporation in conservative, pro-business America -- reinforced by the law, deregulation, and the Myth of the Rugged American Man. The chapter examines these spurs to telemedia concentration.

Law: The federal court system prepares the ground for the telescope: the 'doctrine of corporate personhood' as the seedbed for the Constitutional inversion of the Bill of Rights and the corporate assumption of First-amendment privilege. Free-speech guarantees intended as citizen-rights become the basis for the Mediarchy's shielding of program excesses, the promotion of media concentration, the undermining of the public interest standard, and the blocking of public access to telemedia. Money is equated with speech. The *Red Lion* case, the legal landmark affirming the rights of listeners and viewers, is overthrown.

Recent decisions by the federal courts buttress the ambitions of the broadcasting industry to shape the future of the "information revolution."

Deregulation and Legislation: The race to telemedia monopoly is promoted by deregulation through three presidencies -- Reagan, Bush and Clinton. Its principal memorials are the abolition of the "fairness doctrine," the monopoly-advancing Telecommunications Act of 1996, and the rightwing "Law and Economics" project, which disables antitrust enforcement against mergers and acquisitions in mass telemedia.

Political power and Ideology: A flashback to the age of Radio: Franklin Roosevelt and Father Coughlin have pioneered the politicization of telemedia power, exploiting the seductive eloquence of the electric media to assemble supporters in the millions. On the right, the mantle of the 'radio priest' passes to Senator Joseph McCarthy, and blacklisting drives the liberal intelligentsia from positions of power in radio and television.

McCarthy's contemporary heirs include a loose alliance of telemedia ideologues: televangelists typified by Jerry Falwell, William Buckley, and talk-show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh. Public television is assailed. Liberal access to the air is checked.

Shared political interests unite corporate with social conservatism. Commercial telemedia becomes a prime instrument for the shifting of the American ideological balance rightward. Conservatives dominate the commercial telemedia: Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, Newt Gingrich and others. Rush Limbaugh mobilizes "ditto heads" to defeat restoration of the 'fairness doctrine' (dubbed "the Hush Rush Bill") and is a powerful accomplice to the election of a Republican Congress in 1994. Pat Robertson and others employ television to publicize a political agenda. Falwell exploits the videocassette against Clinton.

#### Chapter IV -- The "Engine of Consumer Capitalism"

*"TV exists to sell soft drinks, tires and beer."  
- Conservative columnist-TV panelist George Will -*

This chapter examines the role of commercial television in the consumer economy: 1) the production and distribution of primal program "product" to deliver the largest number of "eyeballs" at the lowest cost-per-thousand to advertisers; 2) the trading and amassing of licensed stations and system properties, in many cases at vastly ballooned prices, and 3) vertical "synergy" to cover all bets and bases in the struggle to monopolize new media. Station trading amounts to the tax-free shuffling for private gain of public property.

The exploitation of the power of television for commercial purposes achieves a vital psychic aim: the maintenance of an economic system based on thoroughly commodified viewers: "...men who want to consume more and more, and whose tastes are standardized, and can be easily influenced, anticipated" and statistically quantified (Erich Fromm). Television advertising generates artificial wants and needs to sustain high production, the economic endgame of consumption.

The appeal of "old" technology to advertisers -- broadcast television, and its extension to cable -- withstands the inroads of so-called "new media," even as audiences are fragmented by the VCR, DBS, and computerized access to the Internet and Web.

The chapter begins the book's discussion of the profoundly injurious effect of a wholly commercialized TV system upon content. Programs, including news, are packaged to accommodate advertiser tastes, and conformed to a map of America drawn along demographic lines. Content is targeted to specific market categories. Numbers -- ratings, consumer-testing techniques and surveys -- are the currency of the system, overwhelming

transcendent values of what is good, of what is aesthetically and intellectually important. Ironically this derivative, "flavor-of-the-week" approach only exacerbates the failure rate.

The economics of mass-produced programs as "goods" is dominated by movie studios and networks. Large rewards are based on re-use and exportability at low cost. Maximizing profit from overseas sales of TV programs is based on heavy exploitation of sex, violence and sports. Government policy supports the endgame foreign critics call cultural imperialism -- formulized TV product to enhance export earnings and globalize the "American Dream."

### **Chapter V -- The Stories that Commercial TV Tells (and Doesn't Tell)**

*"It's about student nurses in Dallas in the summer and the air-conditioning doesn't work so they sweat a lot."*

- TV Producer Aaron Spelling describing a prospective TV series -

The Mediarchy and its allied producers and advertisers become America's collective storyteller, producing stories important not for the telling but created for the selling on commercial television, superseding parents, teachers, preachers, and balladeers. This chapter examines the consequences of the commodification of "story," the most potent teaching tool. The age-old bonding and socializing purposes of story are replaced by commodified content that gives viewers not what they want or need but what they are conditioned to expect.

Story content is analyzed: what advertisers and agencies want, extensions of their commercials. Television's narrative appeal is examined -- its ability to invoke motion, merge sound with sight and action, and impose self-serving symbolic meaning on image. But rigid formulas result in enormous rates of creative failure.

An examination of these formulas and genres reveals a major industry in which creativity is shunned, along with experimentation and risk. Mediarchy's narrow, creative purpose is the maintenance of a high comfort level that, by osmosis, enhances viewer acceptance of commercial messages. Analyses of plot-lines of commercial "product" determine the nature of the content: they are about "nothing."

The chapter investigates the dynamics of "nothing" as filler: plot-lines that seem to evoke controversy and debate have been pre-tested and found by measurement to be safe. Examples of faux-daring include black middle-class and lesbian themes (e.g. "Ellen"), which do not reflect boldness but merely ratify the

emergence of coherent power blocks of blacks and gays as social, viewing and buying forces.

The chapter demonstrates how a society-building medium fails a vital social purpose by excluding important social themes. It essentially isolates people considered too poor or too old or small in numbers to "matter." For this reason, minority populations of heavy viewers absorb mixed messages. Content analyses by Gerbner and others quantify the marginalization of the poor, minorities, women, and the elderly -- "markets" in which sponsor-advertisers have little interest.

The stories of the commercial content industry breed "paralysis in the parlor," the reinforcement of middle-class lifestyles, consumerist values, the soothing of discontents, and the enhancement of viewer-susceptibility to commercial instructions. TV fiction ambiguously blurs the line between reality and fantasy. Subliminal messages are salted in program content. Sexual voyeurism and violence are exploited for both psychological and economic ends. They "travel well" for export purposes.

The potential of the telemedia to create a vital audio-visual literature of electronic storytelling is tragically wasted.

## Chapter VI -- Commodifying the News

*"What kind of a statement do we make when our news divisions and our anchors devote all that time to O.J.? Our own integrity and dignity are involved. We are doing something that we know is not good for the country or the profession."*

- Rick Kaplan, executive producer, the ABC Evening News with Peter Jennings, 1995 -

The chapter examines a new market-driven journalism described above by the new president of CNN. It is no longer motivated by professionalism, editorial competence, and the imperative of "the right to know," but profit and control. We investigate the consequences of the Mediarchy's money-driven decision to transform electronic journalism from a public service to a revenue center. News alone accounts for more than half of local station income.

The chapter illustrates the desertion or separation from the newsroom of seasoned, informed professionals who put story first. With the demise of the Murrow-CBS model of news as service, society is deprived of an informed social conscience in the newsroom: the Severeids and Smiths, the Shirers and Kuralts. For their successors (see Kaplan above), loyalty to corporate editorial codes and economic aims excuse all excesses. Censorship distorts or eliminates penetrating news coverage of critical issues: poverty, the workings of the economy, the

environment, overpopulation, abortion, the politics of ideology, corporate misconduct, race, and policy issues involving the telemedia themselves.

This represents one of the grievous structural issues of electronic information under Mediarchy: catastrophic collapse in the societal feedback loop that galvanizes us to recognize and act on major social shortcomings. Others include "instancy," which places speed ahead of news judgment, and contributes to a glut of information without knowledge. "High-impact" images determine the news agenda. Reportage of feelings replace meaning. Hype distorts data. The perceptions of commodified telejournalism replace human content.

As sales culture replaces editorial culture, Mediarchy eliminates the once-inviolable heat-shield between editorial content and advertiser influence. Amusement formulas are incorporated as measures of news value. Sensation and artifice replace substance. Hired consultants from the social sciences such as Frank Magid lend deniability to senior managers as the commercial local news report becomes a marketing tool for the maximizing of personality and advertising revenues, and the avoidance of viewer discomfort.

Commodification of electronic journalism is the aim of pioneer consultant Frank Magid's standardized news formula and look-alike Ken-and-Barbie anchors. They become a national cliché: blood, fluff-by-news-team, "action-weather," "action-sports," publicity-event journalism, and impending doom. Documentary and discussion genres are spurned by the new journalism. Political campaign ads on local news broadcasts replace insightful political news coverage.

News hybridization fills the vacuum -- the near-and-faux news of amusement celebrities, talk-jocks, interviewers, and electronic news publicists. Political coverage becomes a sports contest. Hired surveys and polls replace original, enterprise reporting. Police-blotter crime overwhelm civic journalism. Studies and anecdotal data demonstrate the propagation of civic illiteracy on society's primary news medium: the relative abandonment of local politics, government, and social issues. Bankruptcy of content promotes the death of civics and the downtown, the murder of civility and credibility. The major casualty is an open society.

## **Chapter VII -- The Ministry of Teleculture**

*"The cable is out. That's the most important thing. What're you gonna do, read a book?"*

- The Mayor of West Point, Ky., explaining the order to evacuate homes during the flooding of March 1996 -

This chapter examines the ways in which commercial TV culture subsumes American "Pop Culture" in the telecentric epoch. Commercial television becomes the product model that redefines creative standards and values for all other media, and conditions the cultural tastes of its audiences. Books, newspapers, magazines, music and sports are telegenized, with the quantifiable targets of "eyeballs" to define cultural worth.

This chapter argues that folk culture, the spontaneous creation of indigenous peoples, has been erased from the American consciousness by telegenized, adolescent, masscomm culture. Its products carry the stamp "shot in New York" or "recorded in Los Angeles" by an incorporated Ministry of Culture that oversees a standard-issue reductionist monoculture. Tastes are debased and "Greshamized." Expectations are lowered. Fresh ideas from new sources are denied access to the distribution apparatus. Minority interests go unserved and niche interests wither. Cultural limits feed political restraints.

Exposure to high culture is suppressed by Mediarchy and dubbed "elitist" by rightwing rhetoricians, part of the cultural retrenchment pressed by conservative interests for political purposes. Fine music, art, drama, history, passionate discourse are quarantined from the commercial air. The output of PBS is ransomed to corporate patronage and political control. The late Dr. Alan Bloom notwithstanding, *The Closing of the American Mind* is as much a product of the corporate telescreen as deficiencies in formal education. Johnnie won't read, because he hasn't been taught how and what to view, and because he may only view what he is given.

It's argued that cable provides multiple channels and choices. But the promise of options is a false illusion. Excepting C-Span, cable program services become the narrowcast clones of broadcast networks. There is a television set available, seemingly everywhere -- but not very much to watch. The narrow spectrum of commercial television program fare constricts intellect: sitcomery, violence-cum-sex for the televoyeur, super-scoring super-stars, talk as shock, and news as amusement. The misshapen representation of the range of human interest and endeavor belies the much-heralded "diversity" and "choice" proclaimed by free-market rhetoric.

The chapter identifies and defines video illiteracy as a central element of Anti-Culture, and argues that a prime failure of education is less its neglect of the classics than an avoidance of media literacy instruction and a sound introduction to the nurturing of good taste. This absence is at the root of viewer misuse: the unselective, indiscriminate absorption of bad programs. Studies show the behavioral effects of overdosing on television, including the "mean world" syndrome, anomie, cynicism, anxiety, disengagement and withdrawal. Schools

and parents must educate the young to the ideas and works of high culture.

Commercial television becomes America's (and, increasingly, the world's) secular religion: its pantheon of celebrity-gods offering viewer-voyeurism, its comfort-station solicitude (Oprah, Dr. Laura, even Martha Stewart) replacing spiritual succor. Fundamentalist religionists seem to engage the Mediarchy (more Americans recognize Mickey Mouse than can identify the source of the Sermon on the Mount), but on the wrong ground. The contradictions between the gospel of consumer capitalism with its glorification of "stuff" and the tenets of the Judaeo-Christian ethic are touched on here.

This chapter argues that television is not a business but the prime technology in a vital social process. A confrontation with the contradictions of *laissez-faire* capitalism as driving myth of the commercial, communication arts is essential to an American cultural renaissance. The book calls for a vital public role in a spontaneous, monopoly-free Teleculture of new artists, new ideas, and new forms.

#### Chapter VIII -- Kidvid: The \$130 Billion Ransom

*"We recognize that if we get kids to watch us at this age, we have them for life. That's exactly the reason we're doing it."*

- Geraldine Laybourne, Pres., Nickelodeon Cable Networks,  
1994 -

Ms. Laybourne, now helming Disney's cable output, confesses openly to commercial television's most egregious abuse: its social conditioning of America's young to be "little consumers" in order to groom them into big ones. This chapter describes how Mediarchy programmers and telemarketers prepare youth for a present and future life in the shopping malls: through such "kidvid" as X-MEN, MARVEL SUPER HEROES, POWER RANGERS, BEAST WARS, AND MUMMIES ALIVE. Disney is examined, along with Fox, as "a kind of TVA of leisure and entertainment."

The author, a one-time avid comic-book reader, enlarges on the extremist character of commercial kidvid, described by medical and counselling authorities as a public health menace that endangers America's progeny. The syndrome includes the consequences of premature exposure to gratuitous TV violence and sex without context; issues of reality misperception, obesity, the breeding of narcissism, withdrawal from social interaction, and the undermining of cultural taste. Research and clinical evidence support such concerns.

The chapter examines the Mediarchy's kidvid production industry -- who runs it, how its programs are made, the extent of

the market it seeks to exploit. It examines the effects of kidvid on the intellect of the "screenager": high-impact content and editing to overwhelm the cortex, impacting on learning, emotion, and behavior. The economic objective of kidvid is the estimated annual purchasing power of at least \$130 billion controlled by children from age 5 through 13, directly through allowances, and indirectly through their influence on the consumer choices and habits of parents. We look at the ways in which young viewers use television, how parents parent them through the TV age, and how marketing techniques defeat parenting.

In school as well as at home, TV penetrates the life of the young. The most powerful instrument of education in the society, commercial TV overwhelms the classroom itself, impacting on performances in students' reading and writing levels. Through such misrepresented school programming as "news" on Channel One, a huge commercial in-school marketing industry is dedicated to screenager socialization. Tight cross-promotional links between commercial TV and "youth industries" -- soft drinks, fast foods, cereals, motion pictures, apparel, sports, and toys -- creates a snare of byzantine complexity for kids and a billion-dollar marketing industry for Mediarchy.

With counsel from Washington's principle mass media lobbies, Mediarchy invokes industry's First-amendment rights to protect its kidvid cachet -- overturning governmental efforts at effective policymaking. The concerns of the public-interest and child-advocate communities are disarmed in the intense politics surrounding kidvid. Loopholes in the law and regulations produce such thoroughly flawed band-aids as v-chip technology, content ratings, and "quality" programming requirements, placing corporate *laissez-faire* prerogatives ahead of healthy child-rearing. At the FCC and the Congress, public servants bend before the commercial interests of the Mediarchy, abandoning parental concerns and their own statutory responsibilities to defend the longterm public interest in America's young.

#### **Chapter IX -- Techno-politics and Television: Consuming Democracy**

*"Will Gresham's Law operate in the broadcasting and the political worlds, wherein the bad inevitably drives out the good? Will the politician's desire for re-election and the broadcaster's desire for ratings ... seek the lowest common denominator of appeal? For myself, I reject that view of politics, and I urge you to reject that view of broadcasting."*

- President John F. Kennedy to the NAB Annual  
Convention, 1961 -

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"I go in to see a candidate, and [then] this hack who's been in more campaigns than I'll ever see goes in. His argument's right and my argument is wrong. But I've got the numbers, and I'll win every time."

- Unidentified media consultant, quoted in *The New York Times*, 7 May 1995 -

Reasoned political argument fades before the big "numbers" of campaign dollars and voter impressions on commercial television. Cash-driven TV politics have short-circuited the democratic process and ransomed incumbents to corporate oligarchy. In this chapter, the excesses of techno-politics are described and examined: the fusing of political campaigning and governing with masscomm technology, advertising and propaganda, applied social science, consumerism, and enormous amounts of money. If you can't pay your staggering television bills, you can't make it to the White House, Capitol Hill or the state house.

The strategic placement of the Mediarchy at the center of techno-politics creates a major center of profits and influence for commercial television. For campaigning politicians, the need to meet their television bills place them at the mercy of big cash sources: soft money and political action committees. Techno-politics by commercial television biases the political process toward incumbents, and reduces voter turnout.

The origins of techno-politics: beginning with the Eisenhower campaign in 1952, candidates are "sold" as products on commercial television; citizens are morphed into consumers; politics is modeled on choices among "brands." The advertising industries consolidate a focal role in the campaign, adapting to politics the quantitative polling techniques of consumer habits. Telemedia consultants become rich and powerful campaign fixtures. More than half of each campaign dollar goes to television, diverting the energies of leadership to frenetic "dialling for dollars," giving unprecedented leverage to big contributors.

A new industry is created, along with the new Praetorians who drive it, from David Garth to Dick Morris. They create a sprawling and costly techno-political mafia, from political pollsters to script writers and make-up artists, undermining grassroots party structure and the politics of consensus.

Effective reform of techno-politics begins by getting big political money out of commercial television, eliminating paid political ads as the major vehicle of political communications, and requiring payback from the Mediarchy to its society: free air time for wide-ranging dialogues about ideas and improved news coverage of government and politics.

## Chapter X -- The War for the Electric Demosphere \*\*\*

*"This is the time when all good citizens must take to the public sphere, and knowingly reclaim their government."*  
- Prof. Nelson Bowie -

This chapter argues for the reopening to the public of the Demosphere, the space for the conduct of democratic business now ceded to commercial television and radio for private purposes. It describes the ways in which public entry to public media has systematically been blocked by privatization and the politics of Mediarchy. It explains why the Internet and the Web are not an adequate substitute for significant private divestiture of the electronic "common."

"Demosphere" is defined and elaborated: the public collective on which citizens and their leaders interact for the conduct of the society's affairs and the sharing of collective experience. Print constituted the Demosphere -- the seed-ground of democracy -- in colonial America, and in pre-revolutionary France. Our electronic counterpart is -- ought to be -- the electromagnetic spectrum and cable.

The chapter argues that Mediarchy's much-touted multiplicity of channels has failed to provide adequate choice, or a diversity of voices, ideas, and creative content. With deregulation and privatization under Mediarchy, with the hardening of consensus politics into extremist partisanship, access to the electronic Demosphere is limited to those who can pay for it, or whose views accord with the ideology of corporate conservatism.

Understanding telemedia as influence, the Mediarchy exploits television as "a carrier of a political philosophy that extends corporate power in the world (Ben Bagdikian)." Studies underscore the disappearance of balance and fairness, and the dominance of conservative viewpoints in what passes for television discussion and debate. News content is similarly tailored.

The concerted campaign to abolish the 'fairness doctrine' in the 1980s served as a precursor to the occupation of public space, chilling news and documentary examinations of social issues of importance.

Under concerted attack by Speaker Gingrich and ideological allies, along with the Heritage Foundation, the Center for the Study of Popular Culture, and others, public broadcasting's vital

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\*\*\* The term was originated by journalist-commentator Ronnie Dugger as the designation for the public "common," the ground on which citizens and their leaders interact for the conduct of the business of the body politic. That public space has become increasingly ineffable and electronic.

segment of the Demosphere is held hostage to content control. The system is made highly vulnerable to ideological blackmail through Congressional and corporate restraints on PBS and NPR funding and content, and efforts at privatization of the public system.

A shining opportunity is lost to dedicate revenue to the construction of a vibrant public Demosphere for mass telecommunications. Billions in proceeds from federal auctions of spectrum are used to balance the federal budget. Commercial broadcasters are granted advanced digital channels free of charge, with no obligation to pay for them. Corporate power blocks efforts to place a public telecommunications fee on advertising, now wholly tax-deductible.

In seminal legislation passed by Congress in the 1980s, under effective industry lobbying, cable systems were freed from public-interest responsibilities, including the financial and logistical support of public access channels. Though the cable industry consists of community monopolies granted by public charter, with wires strung along public rights-of-way, there is no responsibility to the public interest by cable systems in the communities they serve.

These failures can be reversed. A vigorous and open "speaker's corner" remains the cornerstone of democratic vigor in the age of electronic information.

#### **Chapter XI -- The Critical Wedge: Creating an Evolving System**

*"A tour of Toynbee will reveal that all civilizations of the past have gone down through failure to devise new cultural strategies suited to their new technologies."*

- Marshall McLuhan, letter to a friend, 19TK -

The closing chapter enlarges on McLuhan's suggestion that the American future rests on the rededication of electronic mass communication technology to the public interest -- that a private monopoly over the Teleculture is hostile to the nature and needs of a free people, their institutions, and their destiny. It proposes a policy agenda for telemedia reform. It calls for at least 25 per cent "de-privatization" of the broadcast spectrum and cable, and the creation of a public telecommunications trust to support the rich tapestry of a vibrant Demosphere.

Telemedia reform is the focal wedge for redefining the place of government in the cultural life of a free people, and restraining corporate power. Whether E.B. White's vision of television as a "saving radiance" can be actualized rests on the reallocation of a significant portion of telemedia from the privatized domain of Mediarchy to public uses. A re-enchanted

television must provide wider choice, democratic access, program experimentation, service to community, and, implicitly, a high American culture.

The author offers a specific set of recommendations for the democratization of telemedia, the revitalization of the public interest standard, and the creation of an electronic Demosphere. The agenda falls under the essential rubrics of divestiture and reallocation, democratization of access, and strengthening of public telecommunications:

- 1 - divestiture of ownership, inspired by the AT&T model
- 2 - reallocation of public airways and channels to create a mixed, balanced system of private and public mass telecommunication and a new Telecommunications Law encoding government re-regulation of the industry
- 3 - through public representation on policymaking bodies affecting public telecommunication, including the FCC, public broadcasting and station boards, and other relevant bodies; and the creation of national viewer councils
- 4 - a formula for the strengthening and funding of an independent public telecomm sector, and its insulation from political blackmail and interference: a strong, independent public broadcasting and cable system, a community-based radio and television system; assured community public access on cable; a coherent public program for in-school and inter-school telecommunications
- 5 - well-crafted court tests to re-dedicate First-amendment law to the public right to know and to speak, reform of anti-monopoly law to recognize changes in electronic mass communication, and revitalization of the public-interest standard as it specifically applies to national need
- 6 - the implementation of media literacy education as a matter of public policy and support
- 7 - revitalization of the Teleculture, in part through creation of a cabinet-level Department of Telecommunication, and reawakening of the telecommunications arts through a National Endowment for Telecommunications
- 8 - Constitutional protection under a Common Property Amendment assuring the integrity of public space and resource, modelled on existing protections for private property

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This chapter is written as a work in progress. It responds to the adjuration that one cannot be critical of the *status quo* without lighting some candles to illuminate ways to make it better. Nor can a writer be limited by the "art" of what seems presently possible. Clearly, a transformative time will come. And we must be ready for it. The once-impregnable tobacco industry and the former Soviet Union stand as eloquent examples of the Buddhist truth that success contains the seeds of failure, and that today's impossibilities are tomorrow's likelihoods.

Jerry M. Landay  
Urbana, IL  
12 September 1997

The Mediarchy -- A Partial Bibliography

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He is a former news executive and journalist for the Westinghouse Broadcasting stations (Group W). His work derives from more than thirty years as a teacher, writer, lecturer, and news correspondent, public affairs producer and executive for CBS-News, ABC-News, Walter Cronkite's Satellite Education Services/PBS and Group W radio and TV stations.

He has written for NPR's *All Things Considered*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The London Telegraph*, *The London Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Television Quarterly*, *Film Quarterly*, *Illinois Quarterly*, *The Columbia Journalism Review*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Current*, the *Champaign News Gazette*, and the *Champaign Octopus*.

He is the author of three books: *Silent Cities, Sacred Stones*. (Weidenfield/Dutton), *The Dome of the Rock* (Newsweek Books), and *The House of David* (Weidenfield/Dutton).

Landay served for a year as a national editor on the News of the Week Section of the Sunday New York Times. For ABC, he covered the Nixon White House during the Watergate crisis. Landay covered every presidential campaign from 1960 through 1976. He spent seven years abroad as a correspondent and writer, based in London.

He was co-executive producer, with Nebraska Educational TV Network, of PBS' Earth Day documentary PROFIT THE EARTH, the keynote broadcast of public television's 1990 Outreach Alliance project on environmental issues, aired by PBS in prime time on 16 April, 1990, and again on 12 September, 1990.

At the University, student documentary units that he taught and supervised produced four award-winning documentaries aired on some 100 PBS stations: DRINKING 101, on campus alcohol abuse, A DIFFERENT SET OF RULES: THE

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STORY OF A DATE RAPE, THE FREEDOM RIDER, and WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SATURDAY NIGHT. Three of the productions were honored by the Academy of TV Arts and Sciences as best regional student-produced documentary in 1991, 1992, and 1994.

For eight years, until 1984, he served as a news correspondent for CBS-News, and was seen and heard on all regular news broadcasts. Much of his television work was seen regularly on the SUNDAY MORNING broadcast. For ABC-News from 1972 until 1975, he was a White House correspondent during the Nixon and Ford administrations, and reported regularly on the Watergate crisis. He travelled with the Nixon party to the Soviet Union, France, Britain, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi-Arabia and Iceland.

In 1987, he created AMERICAN ORIGINALS, a biographical documentary series on American role models, in collaboration with MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and the Disney Channel.

At the University of Illinois, he was for two years a member of the Board of the ILLINI MEDIA COMPANY, publisher of the student-produced Daily Illini and licensee of the student station WPGU. From 1989 to 1992, he was creative consultant to WILL-AM-TV, the university-licensed public broadcasting stations, and moderator of the WILL-TV discussion program TALKING POINT.

Before coming to Champaign-Urbana, Landay was president of The Landay Creative Group, Inc., a communication company which designed and produced commissioned documentaries. The firm won praise for its documentary celebration of Thomas A. Edison, THE INVENTION FACTORY, still seen by visitors to the Edison National Historic Site, West Orange, N.J.

Mr. Landay was invited by Walter Cronkite to serve as executive producer of the national youth public affairs series WHY IN THE WORLD broadcast on PBS, underwritten by The General Motors Corporation. A creative production house he founded, LCG, carried out innovative video commissions on artificial intelligence for the Kurzweil Corporation: a videocassette introduction to its voice-driven command-and-control system, titled LISTEN TO ME!, and the first audiocassette production ever to accompany a stock offering in the U-S - on the Kurzweil 250 electronic music system.

In thirteen years with Group W, he served as national political correspondent, based in Washington. For five years, he was chief foreign correspondent and director of the Group W Foreign News Service, based in London. He editorially supervised a staff of Group W correspondents and stringers, stretching from Moscow to Sydney. In addition, Mr. Landay travelled on journalistic assignments to more than 20 countries, including Vietnam and the Soviet Union. He also filed

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stories regularly to Newsday, the Long Island daily. For Group W, he also directed radio station newsrooms in Pittsburgh, Boston and New York. His interest in the Middle East, beginning with coverage of the 1967 War, inspired his three books.

While in London, Mr. Landay served as president of the American Correspondents Association. The WINS, New York, news staff which he headed for Group W won two Sigma Delta Chi awards for journalistic excellence. He was a member of the Reform Club of London.

He has three children. Jonathan is a Washington correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor covering defense and national security issues. Woodrow is a documentary producer and editor serving the Australian Broadcasting Company news bureau in Washington, D.C. A daughter, Stephanie Lisa, is an assistant district attorney in Bronx County, New York. His wife Sandra Chabot is choral director at Parkland College, Champaign, IL. Mr. Landay is a magna cum laude graduate of Syracuse University, Class of '51.

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