

JOHN MATTOS

Media & Democracy

A BOOK OF READINGS & RESOURCES

Edited by Don Hazen & Larry Smith - Institute for Alternative Journalism

Making Media Work

WHY WE MUST GET BEYOND
DISNEYLAND JOURNALISM

Danny Schechter

IN EARLY JANUARY of 1996 I attended a \$19 billion dollar "special meeting" called by the ABC Capital Cities Corporation to ratify its mega deal with the Walt Disney Company. I was there as a shareholder, a residual benefit from my years as a producer at ABC News.

I went to watch corporate democracy at work.

The first thing I noticed was that no ballots were distributed until there was an objection from the floor. Obviously, the deal was already done and this public meeting was simply a required ritual. The vote was held before discussion on it was permitted, reminding me of the line from *Alice in Wonderland*: "First the verdict, then the trial."

I did get to ask a question of Cap Cities Chairman Thomas Murphy about the implications of this media merger mania for the future of democracy. Murphy didn't miss a beat before dismissing my inquiry. "Am I concerned?" he asked. "No, I'm not concerned." For Murphy and the institutional investors who rose to applaud him, this was one of the biggest paydays of their lives, with Disney expected to shell out \$10 billion dollars for their stock. "It doesn't get any better than this," Murphy enthused:

437,000 shares voted against; 121 million for!

In this era of Mickey Mouse and Westinghouse, when six or seven giant monopolies are poised to dominate the entire mediascape, what are those of us concerned with democracy to do? How do progressives fight back?

On the face of it, we are not doing a very good job. Forces to the left, if not on the left (including that alphabet soup of liberal advocacy groups), have been silent and ineffective as the right-wing dominated Congress rolled back an array of welfare state legislation.

A *New York Times* front-page story noted, "In Centers of Power, Fewer Voices on Left," reporting that liberal advocates admit that they are not skilled in framing issues, using technology, or electronic media. In short, they acknowledge not being sophisticated enough to compete with a far smaller but better funded opposition. (Needless to say, the *Times* has not been particularly aggressive in reporting the extent of popular resistance to Republican initiated cutbacks. Right-wing ideologues and activists still get more ink and airtime than their counterparts on the other side of the spectrum.)



DAVE EGGERS

AS A MEDIA professional with a unique vantage point, having worked in alternative and mainstream media — print, radio and television — I am always struck by how the right properly pinpoints media at the top of its strategic plan, while the left thinks about media strategy as an afterthought when it even considers at all. If you examine just how Newt Gingrich took over Congress, you'll realize that his whole GOPAC blitzkrieg started as a communications strategy.

If we want to promote democracy and challenge vested interests pursuing global economic agendas at the expense of social needs, we have to focus on understanding and explaining how the media fits into all this — as both a hegemonic force of domination and an indispensable tool for outreach and organizing.

We cannot even talk about changing America without confronting and remaking media power.

There is no denying that media is a central force in American life, and potentially an instrument for social change. We live in a media culture where the issues we discuss are framed by media coverage and echoed through a TV-dominated popular culture. When an issue is not on television, it doesn't exist as such for most Americans.

Yet the fact remains that most Americans like television. They watch it for hours. It transports them out of their day-to-day lives. Sometimes the stupider it is, the more popular it can become. We have to understand why — and make sure that our criticisms of the media industry do not become viewed as attacks on the people who watch TV — knowing as we do that viewers choose between the narrow options they are offered, between narrow choices they have been conditioned by constant repetition to accept. It is often marketing and hype that makes the difference, mobilizing potential viewers through cumulative impact.

Many alternative ideas are just not presented in a compelling way, not professionally promoted, or well marketed. Many are not that accessible. It is far too simplistic to blame the people who watch TV, or for that matter, to deduce that because a mass audience is glued to the tube religiously, that they like what they are seeing. A recent *New York Times* poll found that over half of TV viewers could not name one program that they considered really memorable. Not one.

The fact of TV's popularity does not explain another fact — that public criticism of television is growing exponentially even though most people know that there are few channels through which to express their concerns and fewer still that seem

to have any impact.

Yet there are emerging contradictions at the heart of the industry itself that may be opening up new arenas for challenge and change.

Media businesses may be dynamic, but they are also inherently unstable because market forces and new technologies are forever shaking their dominance and shaking up their modes of coverage. Just look at what's happened in the last quarter of the century in almost every sphere of communication, from telephones to satellites, from TV to cable, and now in the "new media." Increasingly, futurists are banking on the new technology, weaving visions of the seemingly unlimited potential of cyberspace, and by clear implication admitting that the "old media" has had it, is already history. Ironically, just as big media merges to become more concentrated and centralized, the Internet is devolving power. Technologies with potentially awesome powers for communication are in the hands of ordinary people, though they tend to be a minority, even an elite.

Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park* and one of America's most commercially successful writers, has identified the news media as we know it as a "dinosaur," headed for extinction. "To my mind, it is likely that what we now understand as the mass media will be gone within the next 10 years. Vanished without a trace," Crichton predicts. "A generation ago, Paddy Chayefsky's *Network* looked like an outrageous farce. Today...*Network* looks like a documentary."

Besides the squeeze of economic threats, the media industry is also feeling political pressures as opinion polls continue to register mounting public dissatisfaction with the products of our commercial popular culture as well as much of the news media. More and more people are now complaining, writing letters, feeling distressed and even outraged.

The politicians who play to this sentiment, in effect running against Hollywood and the mainstream news media, have tapped into a growing vein of public sentiment, however demagogic and hypocritical their stance. Progressives must speak out on these issues too and not leave the subject to Bob Dole, Bob Bennett, the Christian Coalition, and their ilk.

The first step is to build awareness. Even seasoned professionals are now speaking out, coming to terms with their own roles and responsibilities. Writer Carl Bernstein, who rode high as one of the *Washington Post* reporters who unmasked the Watergate scandal, told *Editor & Publisher*: "We

are being dominated by a global journalistic culture that has little to do with the truth or reality or context. The result of the misuse and abuse of free expression in Western democracies actually disempowers people by making them more cynical about public life."

Even former network executives are admitting that there is a deep institutional problem at work here. Reueven Frank, former head of NBC News, offers: "It is daily becoming more obvious that the biggest threat to a free press and the circulation of ideas is the steady absorption of newspapers, television, networks and other vehicles of information into enormous corporations that know how to turn knowledge into profit — but are not equally committed to inquiry or debate or to the First Amendment." This is a network honcho talking, not Noam Chomsky!

This new media climate — the tendency toward "narrowcasting" with "demographically targeted" media — fragments social identities, class affiliations, and even a sense of being one country. It reflects itself in low voter turnouts, in public indifference and ignorance. Already a Harvard study has equated more TV watching with a major drop in civic participation.

WE NEED to move beyond criticism to consciousness raising and creative action. Enough critique. Enough of pointing out what is increasingly obvious. The shallowness, superficiality and vapidness of so much of our media has to be redefined as a political challenge, as an issue to mobilize around. Media priorities have to be challenged, and themselves become a priority of a more urgent kind on any progressive agenda for change. Alternative journalists have to resist marginalization by becoming adversarial journalists. There's nothing wrong with being both oppositional and pro-active.

In the '60s, corporations like Dow Chemical became targets of protest and symbols of corporate greed and irresponsibility; in the '90s, many media companies deserve similar contempt. The same people who would be outraged if toxic waste was dumped on their doorstep have to be encouraged to express similar rage at the no less toxic junk programs and newsless news being dumped into their living rooms and their brains. Our problem is that there isn't much to view. The Boss is right: 57 channels, nothing on.

The right to information has to be discussed as a human rights issue. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it this way: "Ev-

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everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers." In the U.S., the Carnegie Commission that gave public television its mandate spoke of a "freedom to view."

Democracy itself can only thrive when and if an electorate is informed. The Institute for Alternative Journalism expresses concerns that it hopes to find support for among the public at large. "We believe that democracy is enhanced, and public debate broadened, as more voices are heard and points of view made available," says IAJ executive director Don Hazen. "In today's political and media environment we are especially concerned about increasing media concentration, and about the success of conservative and far right ideas and personalities in framing the issues relevant to us all." They and many others, including the newly organized Cultural Environment Movement, are sparking a needed political debate about the relationship between media and democracy.

In Europe, a group has also put forth a People's Communication Charter, which notes that communication "can be used as a tool to support the powerful and to victimize the powerless" and "affirm[s] that the development of just and democratic societies requires just and democratic communications structures." This document deserves to be more widely known because it spells out a vision of what media can and should be. Without a collective sense of what we can agree on, we will never be able to create political momentum on this issue.

It is my hope that our visions can speak to growing public anxieties and complaints and help spark a broad-based media reform movement.

So far, too much of the momentum for media change has been generated by right-wing political forces, which for years waged a relentless and dishonest campaign against what they described in one word as the "liberalmediaelite." Only once it became obvious that the right itself was more deeply embedded — in high places and low — in almost all media, and in fact in a position to guide

its trajectory, did honest conservatives like John Podhoretz, a political strategist turned-TV critic-turned editor of Rupert Murdoch's conservative weekly magazine *The Standard*, admit that the term "liberalmediaelite" was a politically motivated concoction that was widely used but never really believed. Only fooling, guys.

Yet when right-wing monitoring groups like Accuracy in Media (AIM) inspire left-wing counterparts like FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting), media mainstream tends to pit them off against each other with claims that attacks on the right and left only prove that they are doing their job. They take refuge in the middle, refusing to audit their own behavior by anything other than ratings and the bottom line. Clearly, a new force is needed to break a logjam that celebrates the status quo.

How can that be done? And who can do it?

THERE ARE a growing number of media professionals who are open to participating in such a movement. Not everyone on the "inside" is happy. Many — perhaps most — are demoralized.

If we are to change the way the media works, we need to reach and motivate media workers at

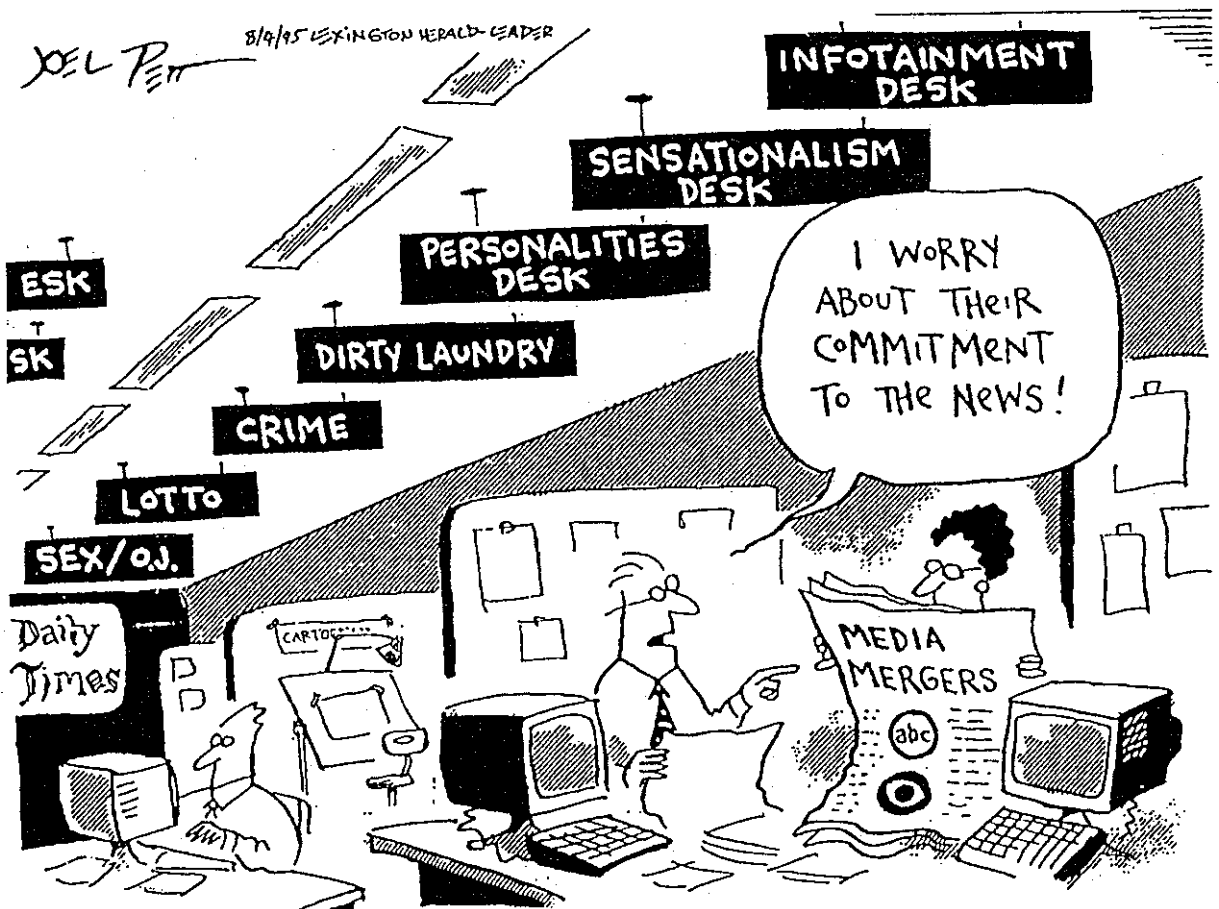
every level in the system. Yet, like viewers, they are cynical and have been conditioned by years of exposure to the rituals and culture of news gathering. Still, there is truly a constituency at large that wants change, it just hasn't been organized yet.

A program for change needs to include a number of components. To start, it needs to build awareness of the immense power and frequent irresponsibility of the media as an industry. Educators, journalists and organizers must begin to talk about this issue and popularize it. It has to be placed squarely on the agendas of unions and issue-oriented organizations. A charter for media accountability, and a coalition to fight for it, are badly needed. If you need current data on so much of the media's avaricious wheeling and dealing, just consult any trade magazine — you will be astonished by the lack of discussion of any ethical issues.

Others steps toward bringing significant change in the media include:

- **More Media Monitoring**

Everyone can monitor media performance. Groups like FAIR have developed manuals and lists of crite-



ria. If teachers and their students, labor unions and their members all began tracking what's on TV and radio, and how the news is being reported, they would be able to better detect and challenge bias. Media literacy — people's ability to "read" the media and think critically about it — has to become part of school curriculums and everyday life.

- **Demand Media Accountability**

Once armed with more information — especially information that is collected by people themselves — citizen groups will be in a better position to demand responsiveness and accountability by media corporations. When media executives are forced to meet with their consumers, they will become more responsive. Most are sure to resist so-called "pressure politics" but they will not be able to ignore it. (You undoubtedly will find that the institutions that do the most to violate the spirit of the First Amendment will be zealous in wrapping themselves in it as an opportunistic shield against criticism.)

- **Advocate For New Legislation and Enhanced Regulation**

Deregulation has given media companies a free hand to pollute the airwaves. Tougher anti-monopoly laws and greater regulation in the public interest by a revamped Federal Communications Commission is in order. The FCC itself has to be democratized with more public hearings and public votes. We might re-read the wisdom of a Newt from another time — Newton Minow — the FCC Commissioner who branded TV a "naked wasteland" 30 years ago.

- **Transform Public Television**

It is time to put the public back into public television with more locally elected community boards and a return to its original mandate to provide a space for alternative voices and broader program choices. Pressure will be needed to democratize and properly finance PBS, which should be funded through a tax on commercial television stations and their advertisers. There needs to be at least one channel in every area that serves the public interest in the broadest possible way.

- **Support Alternative Programming**

Creating new channels in and of themselves will not make for changes in the system unless new programming reflecting a non-corporate view is available. Congress already recognized discrimination against America's independent film makers

when it created the Independent Television Service (ITVS). That agency and other media centers on the local level need to be adequately funded and given guarantees of some form of distribution. "Rights & Wrongs," a series on human rights that I helped produce at Globalvision, has only survived because of ITVS backing. Nearly 150 companies turned down our bid for funding on the grounds that an association with human rights could be bad for business overseas.

In this context, it is essential that independent journalists and media producers find better ways of cooperating with each other and realize that they cannot be really successful unless the media system opens wider. It is discouraging to see so much competition and one-upsmanship among people who are fighting for a fraction of the pitiful funding base that exists. Just compare the U.S. to Canada and you will see that state support for independent journalism and film making is significantly higher north of the border. (The Canadian system has many problems, but we certainly can learn from it.) That's what happens when a society values diversity in culture and is willing to support it.

A media system targeted at creating more consumerism is in conflict with the democratic spirit committed to promoting citizenship. The choices are becoming clearer even if the solutions are not. A state system of censorship and government control is certainly not desirable. Yet citizen attempts to rein in a media system that is out of control are definitely worth encouraging. Business rarely operates in the public interest unless it is required to do so. The movement for social responsibility in business has so far not reached the media industry. Only public awareness and pressure will move the mountain of media inertia.

It's not my role to produce a comprehensive blue print here, but unless someone does, unless media issues are put on the agenda, what's left of the left will continue to talk only to itself. Clearly, a new media reform movement is needed.

May the Media & Democracy Congress be a first step. ■

Danny Schechter is a producer for Globalvision Inc., a production company that produces the human rights series Rights & Wrongs and other projects. A version of this article will appear in his forthcoming book, The More You Watch, The Less You Know: Media Adventures of a Network Refugee.