
Sophisticated critical analyses of the corporate takeover of communication are not easy to come by. This makes McChesney's rigorous and carefully argued scholarship an especially welcome contribution to the literature. This book is of a piece with his earlier Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy (1997); The Global Media, which he co-authored with Edward Herman (1997); and the co-edited collection Capitalism and the Information Age (1998). In Rich Media, Poor Democracy, McChesney argues that the U.S.'s "hypercommercial" corporate media-system contradicts the communication requirements of a healthy democracy, and he insists that structural reform of the media must be part of a broader movement to democratize the core institutions of society: "I argue in this book that the media have become a significant anti-democratic force in the United States and, to varying degrees, world-wide. The wealthier and more powerful the corporate media giants have become, the poorer the prospects for participatory democracy" (p. 2).

While the book deals primarily with the relationship between the media and the state of American democracy, McChesney's argument has much wider application as media corporations globalize and "neoliberal democracy" spreads. His argument is particularly pertinent to Canada, where companies like CanWest Global, Quebecor, and Rogers Communications are restructuring the Canadian mediascape and where public debate is too often reduced to issues such as whether Izzy Asper will be a more benevolent monopolist than Conrad Black.

McChesney's depiction of the media system as increasingly concentrated, conglomerated, and vertically integrated, driven by profit and supported by advertising, is not particularly new. What is refreshing about the book is the analysis he brings to the topic, an analysis characterized by his willingness, first, to engage with a number of the powerful myths which sustain the corporate media-structure and, second, to broaden considerably the debate around media ownership. "In view of the extraordinary importance of media and communication in our society, I believe that the subject of how the media are controlled, structured, and subsidized should be at the center of democratic debate. Instead, this subject is nowhere to be found" (pp. 6-7). McChesney advocates open and broad public discussion of media ownership, discussion which must be informed by a sense of media history and shorn of economic dogma.

The book is divided into two parts of three chapters each. Part I, simply titled "Politics," offers an overview of the U.S. and global media systems, and a structural analysis. Here McChesney seeks to debunk two media myths. First, he rejects the popular notion that applying market principles to communication assures that people get what they want: "As much as demand creates supply, supply creates demand. Media conglomerates are risk-averse and continually return to what has been commercially successful in the past" (pp. 32-33). Second, he devotes an entire chapter to the idea that new communication technologies, and
specifically the Internet, will set us free. The fact that U.S. policy development concerning digital media has excluded broad public participation and has never seriously considered anything but a commercial model means that the Internet’s potential for universal access has been sacrificed to the needs of the market. “So, ironically, the most striking feature of digital communication may well be not that it has opened up competition in communication markets but that it has made it vastly easier, more attractive, and more necessary for firms to consolidate and strike alliances across the media, telecommunication, and computer sectors” (p. 163). This, of course, limits the revolutionary potential of the Internet because “it is a revolution that does not appear to include changing the identity and nature of those in power” (p. 182).

Part II, entitled “History,” criticizes the way neoliberal commentators invoke history to provide “ideological cover” for corporate media interests (pp. 9-11). In chapter 4, he describes the process by which the privatization of U.S. broadcasting became, and remains, “politically sacrosanct” (p. 191). In chapter 5, he seeks to reinvigorate the debate over public broadcasting, in the U.S. and around the world, by—echoing his 1997 Spry Memorial Lecture—rejecting the argument that public broadcasting was simply a product of spectrum scarcity. “Although there is an element of truth in the ‘scarcity’ rationale, the rise of public broadcasting systems across the world also reflected, on more than one occasion, protracted political fights over how best to organize media in a democratic society” (p. 227). While broadcast capacity has increased with digital technologies, the belief that media organizations have some obligation to provide public service has become scarce. “Indeed, the collapse of public broadcasting in the 1990s has less to do with technological change than it does with the worldwide neoliberal adoption of the market and its commercial values as the superior regulator of the media—and of all else. In this sense, the attack on public service broadcasting is part and parcel of the current attack on all noncommercial public service institutions and values” (p. 227). McChesney wants to recapture that lost connection between public broadcasting and democratic politics.

Finally, chapter 6 seeks to debunk the myth that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution authorizes the corporate dominance and hypercommercialization of communication. McChesney rejects the facile analogy (that the courts have largely supported) between freedom of speech and freedom of the press. While freedom of speech is available to all, freedom of the press belongs to a privileged elite. “This accords special privileges to some citizens who can then dominate public debate” (p. 269), particularly as the size of that elite group becomes smaller and smaller.

The best indication of how far along the path to neoliberalism we have ventured is contained in McChesney’s concluding chapter; none of his proposals seem likely to generate serious discussion anytime soon, either in the United States or, unfortunately, in Canada. He advocates, for instance, the emergence of a strong, left-wing political movement dedicated to making media reform central to its agenda. Among the specific components of media reform, McChesney rec-
ommends: the expansion and reinforcement of the existing non-profit and non-commercial media sector; increased state support for public radio and television broadcasting; stricter regulation of commercial broadcasting in the public interest; and the use of anti-trust legislation to break up the largest media firms and to render media markets more competitive.

Regardless of whether or not these proposals are viable, they underscore the merit in McChesney’s structural approach to his analysis. The media comprise one institutional link in a larger political and economic structure which perceives citizens as consumers, regions as markets, and communication as private, commercial enterprise. McChesney steers us away from the wishful thinking of technological fixes and heroic media moguls. The problem is not Conrad Black or Izzy Asper or Rupert Murdoch or Michael Eisner. The problem is a “free market theology” which has rendered notions of public service and social responsibility passé and which is threatening to make us forget what democracy really means.

References

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