Review Essay:
The Mainstreaming of Media Critique

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Critique of the corporate control of the media has gone mainstream. While once only a few voices cried in the wilderness, books describing the abuse of media power, by the likes of Al Franken (2003), Eric Alterman (2003), Joe Conason (2003), and David Brock (2004), line the shelves of bookstores. Documentary films critical of corporate culture, such as Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* and Morgan Spurlock’s *Supersize Me,* win nominations and awards at the Oscars, and Jon Stewart’s nightly mockery of the corporate establishment on *The Daily Show* garners a mass audience. That critiquing the media has become, in fact, part of mainstream media culture itself merits study, but it also gives reason to direct some careful attention to the popular literature that might be said to serve as a foundation for this rise in awareness of the problems with the media.

Criticism of the corporate control of the media is not new; recent popular work builds on earlier work that paved the way. Work in the 1980s by such heroes of the activist left as Noam Chomsky & Edward Herman (1988) and Michael Parenti (1986) identified corporate control of the media as a serious problem. Their work, mostly aimed at a general readership, has been criticized by communications scholars in many ways, most notably for an inadequate recognition of the agency of the audience and an overly rigid theory of the power of economic structures.

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But much has changed since then, both in the media and in the political world. The end of the Cold War and the triumph of neo-liberalism in the 1990s accelerated the trend toward monopoly control of the media first identified by Ben Bagdikian in 1983. This led, on the one hand, to the emergence of a global social movement resisting the neo-liberal capitalist order (which encompasses a critique of the corporate-media system in the form of the “Indymedia” network) and, on the other hand, to the rise of a stridently conservative form of politics and media, best represented by the Fox News Channel. As well, digital computer networks have developed into the basis for a completely new kind of distribution of information and cultural products. We might wonder, then, if this criticism has become popular because it has progressed beyond the problematic assumptions of earlier critiques, or if it is because these assumptions have become less problematic due to the changes in the world around them. In fact, it appears that media critique has become popular despite persistent problems. Looking at the most recent work of some of the pioneers in popularizing this kind of critique can help to understand how and why these ideas circulate outside the university and what their impact might be.

The publication of the first edition of Bagdikian’s *The Media Monopoly* in 1983 can be seen as the beginning of much of this kind of analysis. For all its flaws, it shed important light on a disturbing trend that has continued without interruption since the book’s publication: his prediction that a handful of corporations would control the media by the end of the last century has clearly withstood the test of time. But although the recent seventh edition has been re-titled and updated in important ways, it remains unsatisfying. The “flogging a dead horse” analogy is almost irresistible, even though it is clear that the horse is still alive and kicking: that the critique is well known does not seem to make it any more effective. The largest global media corporations, which he calls the “Big Five,” no longer seek to hide the extent of their power from consumers, and as a result, the problem is already understood by anyone who thinks seriously about the issue. It is perhaps too late to warn us about the takeover of our culture by monopoly capital; the public now needs something more than information about the problem.

Still, the new book contains some interesting discussions; among the best, though, are those retained from earlier editions, including the two chapters on the importance of advertisers as an influence on the overall orientation of publications. This goes to the heart of some important issues, and the anecdotal examples here are well chosen and informative. It is telling that these chapters have been moved from their position in earlier editions to near the end of the book. The relationship of advertising to the main subject of the book is not as simple as Bagdikian might like to think; advertiser influence has no direct link with the structure of ownership of the media, since smaller media in a more competitive industry have at least as much difficulty resisting advertiser pressures. That Bagdikian has not reconsidered this in over twenty years indicates an important problem with his approach.
His weakest discussion, unfortunately, concerns the Internet, which he clearly
does not understand, but the section on which motivated the addition of the word
“new” to the title of this edition. His chapter on new media, which forms the core
of the additions to the book, merely makes mention of the myriad complex issues
raised by the Internet, but it tells readers almost nothing that anyone who regularly
uses the Internet would not already know. For him, the concentrated ownership of
telecoms and ISPs is all that needs to be said; he neglects the fact that the owners
of Internet infrastructure do not control distribution of content. This leaves the
book no further ahead than the sixth edition.

Even Bagdikian’s analysis of ownership is too selective to be convincing. So
much attention is paid to the five largest corporations that dominate the U.S. and
world media, yet the most influential newspapers (The New York Times, The Wall
Street Journal, The Washington Post), the largest radio broadcaster (Clear
Channel), and important owners of chains of TV stations (Sinclair), let alone the
availability of public broadcasting, remain almost entirely undiscussed. While
monopolization is a serious problem, the existence of choices for the audience is
not irrelevant, particularly as those choices have become numerous and important
since he first formulated his argument. By ignoring important facts when they are
inconvenient, he seems to be attempting a manipulation of the reader, rather than
inspiring the kind of confidence in the message that audience members critical of
mass media might seek.

This problem with Bagdikian’s approach is demonstrated by comparing it
with the perspective of other former newspaper insiders. The News about the
News, Downie and Kaiser’s criticism, remains within the range of conventional
political thinking and is less systematic and more descriptive of the way news is
produced in the U.S. than Bagdikian’s, but it still provides the reader with a clear
sense of how things work and how the problems identified by Bagdikian affect the
individuals who work in the industry. The detailed information they provide about
the impact of budget cuts on the capacity of a newsroom to produce serious news
is informative and should be taken seriously. The most useful aspect of the book,
though, concerns what Bagdikian cannot explain: the distinctions between dif-
ferent kinds of media with different political leanings. The authors’ explanation of
the distinction lacks power, but at least they recognize the importance of the dif-
ference between sources such as Fox News Channel and The New York Times. The
fact that the audience makes important choices needs to be taken seriously if the
power in the media is to be understood.

Robert McChesney’s most recent book succeeds more fully, combining a
number of important insights about recent developments with other key ideas
about the enduring structure of media control. A good example is his explanation
of the regulation of digital television and other recent technologies with the same
kind of theory that he used to explain the history of the regulation of radio in the
1930s. This makes possible a very strong argument against commonly heard tech-
nological-determinist justifications for deregulation. His discussion of the rela-
tionship between the rise of advertising as a cultural force and the monopolization
of this American industry through the twentieth century is equally persuasive. Another highlight is his final chapter describing the response of the public to the FCC’s 2003 decision to relax media-ownership limits.

Perhaps most interesting are his arguments about the conservative critique of “the liberal media.” It is hard to deny that this critique serves the interest of an increasingly conservative mainstream media trying to retain an air of balance and objectivity. Also insightful is the discussion of the distinction between social liberalism and economic liberalism: accepting that the corporate media can actually be significantly more liberal on issues such as race and gender relations than they are on economic issues that speak directly to the interest of owners allows much more sophisticated reasoning about not just the right-wing critics, but also about the politics of recent FCC decisions and the responses to them by right-wing organizations such as the National Rifle Association.

This kind of analysis shows that McChesney is more aware of the complexities of the cultural industry than Bagdikian. His awareness of the limited openness that does exist in the mainstream media allows him to acknowledge the existence of a “cottage industry” (p. 120) of left-wing media critique within that mainstream. Interestingly, he also frequently cites right-wing sources to back up his claims about corporate control of the media, prefacing quotations with phrases such as “as is admitted by even . . .,” to show that corporate media power is not a secret, but is already well understood across the political spectrum.

Yet the extent to which criticizing the media has become popular is difficult to reconcile with the argument his book makes: if the corporate control of the media is such a problem (as the bulk of the book consistently asserts), then how is it that there could be such a large number of books, films, and television programming criticizing this fact? That so many people have access to such ideas (in books or on nightly television programs) would seem to imply the existence of important limits to the power of owners, advertisers, and conservative policymakers. The problem cannot be merely a lack of choices for the audience.

McChesney’s discussion of the power of advertisers is also very useful, and it contains more arresting anecdotes testifying to this power. But again, as with many other discussions of the subject, the role of advertising is not well theorized. McChesney is aware, and even claims that it is “widely stated,” that “the product . . . is not so much the . . . program . . . as it is the audience” (p. 145), but he treats this as a mere metaphor, rather than as an analysis with important implications that require further examination.

Most disappointing, though, is McChesney’s dismissal of concerns that the activity of the audience is worth scrutiny. His discussion of critics who fault him for assuming passivity on the part of the audience concludes with an insistence that such study of audience activity is unhelpful: “the important thing—what we can study and influence—is that institutions and structures limit what audiences are permitted actively to interpret” (p. 200).
To be fair, McChesney does acknowledge that the audience should not be neglected, but the brief discussion of the issue serves only to justify his refusal to consider choices made by, or any internal characteristics of, the audience.

He is also quick to dismiss the Internet as an alternative: for him, despite the subversive potential, “[T]he power of the oligopolistic market trumps the subversive potential of the technology” (p. 221), since the most popular websites are those of the giant media corporations and the alternatives are not viable as commercial competitors. Such statements weaken his argument about the ongoing struggles to shape new technologies through governmental policy. On the one hand, he wants to recognize the indeterminate nature of those processes and struggles, but on the other hand, the message of the text is the simple dominance of corporate powers.

It might seem unfair to expect works intended for readers without a background in communication studies to deal with complex issues such as the contradictory implications of new technologies or the active audience. But Peter Steven’s *No-Nonsense Guide to the Global Media* (one in a series of pamphlet-sized introductions to a range of political issues) shows that this is not the case. Steven deftly covers a variety of different perspectives and keeps an open approach to many of the questions under debate in the field. The main ideas of left-wing political-economy critique are discussed, and critical responses to those ideas are also introduced, providing a balanced and even-handed approach that lets readers think for themselves. As an introduction to the large number of issues with which communication studies wrestles, it serves very well indeed. Unfortunately, Steven’s skill in handling the complexities is largely squandered, as the format only allows most of the complex questions, such as those of the active audience, to be raised, but not to be discussed at length. Still, this slim volume serves as an example of how more openness to subtleties need not be sacrificed for introductory texts.

All of these books have their shortcomings, and all of the authors could learn from each other. But what is of the most interest to those trying to understand the popularity of this kind of analysis are the problems that the books share. For the most part, the common problems fall into three categories: a failure to comprehend the centrality of advertising, an inability to explain the recent polarization of political culture, and a failure to recognize the political importance of the Internet. All three of these problems result from the assumption of an audience composed of autonomous agents whose free agency is presumed rather than explained, but which is constrained by the structures of power, whose operation can be studied through an analysis of the political economy of the media. Hence, if only the audience had access to better information, it would be more free to act on its own interest. This mistaken belief prevents such media criticism from explaining much of what is new.

The central role of advertisers cannot be treated adequately if it is assumed that advertising constrains the audience by exercising power over content. Since, in the important case of private broadcast media, the content of the media is deter-
mined by advertisers’ funding of, and thus demand for, media services, the audience must be understood as the product sold to advertisers by the media. Recognition that the audience is not the agent that expresses demand for media products would go further than anything else in strengthening this critique. It changes the meaning of competition between media firms, and hence of monopoly, and it has important consequences for the concept of audience freedom. A free audience is not just one that has an adequate range of choices of programming, but one that can choose not to be sold as a commodity for anyone else’s profit.

The polarization of North American political culture in the last two years—including Bush’s near-defeat in 2004, the size of the opposition to the war in Iraq, and the successful resistance to the FCC—shows that Bagdikian was overstating the case when he claimed that, as a result of the right-wing shift of the political spectrum, the left is “barely holding its precarious position” (p. ix). This assumption of a complete right-wing victory ignores the success of much of the media content that is critical of the conservative establishment and its media, and it gives the false impression of a powerless audience with little ability to withstand the pressures on public opinion created by corporate media. It also ignores the fact that those who read and watch the new conservative media do so actively and willingly, since they have choices of other, less conservative news sources. A better understanding of how the audience has bifurcated requires explanations of these varied choices on the part of the audience—for instance, the class and gender composition of some of these different audiences would be worth study. But this cannot be done within a framework that takes for granted the power of the structure to limit the freedom of the individual members of the audience.

While the political importance of new-media technologies is virtually impossible to measure, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that most of the two million people in the United States who wrote to the FCC or their members of Congress in 2003 probably heard about the problem not as members of a mass-media audience, but through the Internet. McChesney may be right that blogs, e-mail lists, and websites will not replace Fox, Viacom, and Disney as the dominant cultural force, but the point is not whether the Internet can or cannot compete with corporate media oligopolies: this question ignores the fact that the corporate media compete not for audiences but for advertising dollars. The point is that the Internet operates on completely different principles, which allow the consumers of information to have a different relation to the producers—in fact, it radically diminishes the barriers between them and creates possibilities for important new forms of audience activity. The reason that Bagdikian and McChesney cannot recognize this might be their attachment to the idea of autonomous audience members whose choices are constrained by media producers. The Internet makes the flaws in that understanding even more clear, and it is probably the best reason to abandon the old approach to the audience.

Each of these texts covers important ideas, while neglecting some conceptual terrain. But their key weakness—the inability to see the audience as anything
other than a victim of power exercised through control over the information to which it has access—limits their value as a foundation for a critical approach to the politics of communication. The problems with corporate control of the media are not separate from these issues of the nature of the audience and its relationship to media content. While this style of argument has become popular recently, that popularity has not made the critique effective: conservative forces continue to hold the balance of power over the global media industry, as was demonstrated by the recent overwhelming vote in the U.S. House of Representatives to increase the FCC’s power to censor broadcast. Challenging that power will require not just a clearer understanding of the political and economic structure of the media, but also a more realistic view of the role of the audience and its relationship to those structures. Such theories are common inside the academic world, but unfortunately they have yet to be made available in an accessible introductory form to a wider readership.

References