

Free Media? An Interview With Robert McChesney

Editors' Note: *In getting grounded in the media landscape we talked with Robert McChesney, an activist scholar in the area of media policy and founder of Free Press (www.freepress.net). McChesney's description of the active approach toward publications and the press throughout U.S. history can inform and inspire us to shift our media environment to one which is more relevant for an informed democracy.*

According to McChesney the media system in the United States is not a natural system: "It isn't an automatic that if you just get out of the way you get a free press that does all those wonderful things for democracy. Our press system is the result of the explicit policies and subsidies that created it, and it has been since the beginning of the Republic. Free markets have very little to do with our media system. There is certainly a good deal of profit pursuit in the media and a tremendous amount of commercialism, but it's done largely in markets that are government created and subsidized."

McChesney talks about the roots of these subsidies: "The U.S. post office was an institution of extraordinary importance in the first century of American history. Not that it is unimportant now, but in the early Republic it was by far the largest federal body. It was the institution that united this vast, dispersed country into one unit, and the first great debate that was had around the post office was about what to charge newspapers and periodicals to be mailed. At that time, 70% of all the traffic of the post office was newspapers, and within a generation it would be over 90%. The post office, in other words, was the circulation arm of the U.S. press system."

There was some debate about subsidization, but it was not about whether to subsidize, but about to what degree. "The debate on the floor of Congress was between two schools. One group in Congress and in the general public argued that newspaper postage should be heavily subsidized to encourage more newspapers to exist—an idea that if you had lower postage, papers that were very marginal would be able to survive that wouldn't be able to survive if they had to pay the full distribution cost. And that was

one school. The other school of thought, James Madison's, was that all postage at all times for all periodicals should always be free. Any charge at all would be considered censorship, any charge at all would be a form of censorship against dissident ideas, and dissident ideas were critical to a pluralistic democracy."

The concept of supporting the airing of dissident ideas was the theme for the first hundred years of American history, when we had strikingly partisan journalism. This served democracy well. It knit together ideas and facts to present world views for citizens to choose from. "No self-respecting journalism would not have had a point of view prior to the U.S. Civil War, and really through much of the 19th century. The journalism of Jefferson and Madison and Lincoln and Franklin and Jackson, the first 80 years of the Republic, was entirely partisan. Newspapers were affiliated with political parties, and if you picked up a newspaper, you didn't have to flip to the editorial page to figure out where it was coming from. You knew right away and you didn't expect a 'fair shake' from all sides. You were getting a perspective and you were going to have the story covered a particular way. And the system has its weaknesses to some extent that have been chronicled, but it also had great strengths, because every time a story came along it was put into a broader context so people could make sense of complex issues more easily. It wasn't just disconnected factoids which left people confused. The strength of a partisan system in the 19th century, especially through the Jacksonian era, depended upon one crucial thing: that there be multiple viewpoints available. And if someone was dissatisfied with the existing range, it was relatively easy to start a new paper that could offer a different viewpoint. Partisan journalism in that context tends not to turn into blatant propaganda because if it does people will go elsewhere and they'll dismiss you. Newspapers were always fighting for attention, not just of their true believers but of marginal voters their party would need to win. So that kept them in check from being lunatics. In some regards, the First Amendment in that context is guaranteeing the right of people out of power to start their own papers so they can survive."

But the economics of newspapers began to change as they aligned themselves with commercial concerns through accepting advertisements. "In that context it was less and less desirable to have strident partisan journalism because it would turn off perspective customers. So the partisanship that still existed was all one way. It was almost entirely right wing, anti-labor, pro-big business. The business of news became monopolistic and it became very difficult to start a new newspaper unless you were a zillionaire. Such partisanship at this point in our history really rubbed people the wrong way.

This created a crisis of public confidence, and the solution to that crisis was the establishment of professional journalism. "Professional journalism has its strengths, and also its clear weaknesses, not the least of which is relying on accepted sources as the basis of news stories. This means if people in power agree on something, it's not debated in the news. If a journalist raises an issue no one in power raises, they're accused of being unprofessional and ideological. But if they raise an issue someone in power raises, they're considered objective and professional. This has been a tremendous disciplinary factor.

"But the way professional journalism developed in the U.S. is not the only way you can have professional journalism. In the 1930s, leading American journalists believed that genuine independent journalism needed to be independent of politics of owners and advertisers entirely. They didn't think that the professional code actually did that very successfully.

"They also believed that it needed to be independent of official sources of people in power. They took the maxim that journalism should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. It should be critical of everyone in power and should see its job as representing the interests of people out of power. That was their vision of what a truly independent professional journalism would look like. This is actually what is called 'point of view journalism,' because it goes after people in power.

"This was a radically different concept of professional journalism than one that basically spoon feeds what people in power say and then restricts the range of debate to what people in power want to debate."

McChesney says we need a system that provides three things:

- a rigorous accounting of people in power and people who want to be in power;
- a wide range of informed opinions and analysis on the important social issues of the day so that people have the capacity to understand what is going on and not have to hunt for information;
- a way to ferret out liars so the truth can rise out and people who lie are exposed and their points dismissed.

"A healthy, viable democratic press system does those three things. It doesn't mean every outlet does it, but it means in combination the media that people are exposed to should do this. In terms of critique, our media system is an abject disaster on all three fronts, but here are a few things that can be done institutionally and structurally:

"To the extent that we have a commercially based media system, we should have as much local ownership as possible and we should have as little concentration of ownership at the national level as possible as is economically justifiable.

"There is no rational justification to have one thousand radio stations owned by one company. The economics are such that we could have multiple stations and local owners for most stations and the industry would survive just fine. The monopolies that currently exist are certainly dreadfully unhealthy for the communities in which these stations are located. So we want a competitive, locally oriented commercial media system.

"But even the best commercial media system will have its limitations and its problems. It will have what economists call externalities and because of that, we need to have a strong, viable, heterogeneous, nonprofit, non-commercial media sector. And by heterogeneous I'm not talking about just NPR and PBS stations; I'm talking about community stations and subsidies to encourage nonprofit and non-commercial media production. We have to think proactively and creatively to come up with healthy policies to generate that sector and make it strong and powerful."