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The Political Economy of Media

Review of Robert McChesney's book (Part I)

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Theme: Media Disinformation

Robert McChesney is a leading media scholar, critic, activist, and the nation's most prominent researcher and writer on US media history, its policy and practice. He's also University of Illinois Research Professor in the Institute of Communications Research and the Graduate School of Library and Information Science. UI is lucky to have him, and he says there's "no better university in the United States to do critical communication research."

McChesney also co-founded the Illinois Initiative on Global Information and Communication Policy in 2002. He hosts a popular weekly radio program called Media Matters on WILL-AM radio (available online), and is the 2002 co-founder and president of the growing Free Press media reform advocacy group – freepress.net.

McChesney and Free Press want to democratize the media and increase public participation in it. Doing it involves challenging media concentration, protecting Net Neutrality, and supporting the kinds of reforms highlighted at the annual National Conference for Media Reform.

McChesney's work is devoted to it. He also "concentrates on the history and political economy of communication (by) emphasizing the role media play in democratic and capitalist societies" where the primary goal is profits, not the public interest.

McChesney speaks frequently on these issues, and has authored or edited 17 books on them. They include Rich Media, Poor Democracy, the award-winning Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy, and his newest book and subject of this review, The Political Economy of Media: enduring issues, emerging dilemmas. He calls it "the companion volume" to his 2007 book, Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of Media.

McChesney is today's most notable media scholar and critic. Whatever he writes merits reading. This book is a compilation of his best political economy of media work in the past two decades. It contains 23 separate offerings under three topic headings – Journalism, Critical Studies, and Politics and Media Reform. Issues discussed include:

— the problem of journalism;

— a century of radical US media criticism;

— telling the truth at a moment of truth about the invasion and occupation of Iraq;

— journalism – a look back and ahead;

— battling for the US airwaves early on;

— media sports coverage;

— public broadcasting in the digital age;

— the commercial tidal wave;

— the new economy – myth and reality;

— the political economy of international communication;

— the Internet

— US left and media politics;

— rich media, poor democracy;

— the escalating war against corporate media;

— US media reform going forward, and more.

Most content was previously published in journals or as book chapters in anthologies. Most have never appeared in book form before, so may be largely unknown to readers. Three offerings are new and were written specifically for this book. Combined, the material is timeless, cutting-edge and must read on the most vital issue of this or any other time – the state of the media and its importance as a vital information source and fundamental prerequisite for democracy. McChesney quotes James Madison saying:

“A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.”

Today, its mostly from the media, mainly television, and therein lies the problem. Democracy requires a free, open and vibrant media. It, in turn, needs democracy. The “central question” McChesney poses is whether “the media system….promote(s) or undermine(s) democratic institutions and practices. Are media a force for social justice or oligarchy?”

The political economy of the media is committed to enhancing democracy. It first arose in the 1930s and 1940s, blossomed again in the 1960s and 1970s, is often associated with the political left, and that’s a key reason for its decline in the past few decades. Today, the media is in utter disrepair, totally corrupted, controlled by big money, and unconditionally backed by Democrats and Republicans to serve state and capital interests. “We the people” are nowhere in sight, and that has to change.

Scholar/activists like McChesney aim to do it. The Political Economy of Media is his latest effort, and in it he highlights 13 “enduring issues:”

— journalism and its relationship to democracy;

— understanding political, commercial and private propaganda;

— commercial media and politicalization of society;

— media's relationship to inequality – economic, racial, gender, and so forth;

— media's relationship to US foreign policy, militarism and the imperial state;

— the importance and role of advertising;

— the communication policy making process;

— telecommunication policies, regulations or lack of them;

— communication's relationship to global and contemporary capitalism and its predatory nature;

— commercialism's impact on culture and society;

— public radio and broadcasting; how they've been co-opted and corrupted; and the emergence and importance of alternative media institutions and systems;

— the relationship of technology to media, politics and society and importance of the digital revolution; and

— the relationship of media to popular social movements, including a growing force for real media reform.

Along with "enduring issues," McChesney covers "emerging dilemmas" in the wake of neoliberalism's 1980s emergence, its 1990s dominance, the growth of a global economy, and the blossoming digital communication revolution.

At a time government partners with business, profits are the be all and end all, markets we're told work best so let them, taxing the rich is sinful, big government bad, giveaways to the people unacceptable, inequality good, competition better, and best of all is socialism for the wealthy and free market capitalism for the rest of us – aka, the law of the jungle.

By the new millennium, the "bankruptcy and contradictions" of neoliberal dogma lay exposed. Global justice eruptions occurred, became quiescent after 9/11, but still bubble below the surface and may explode anywhere any time. Moreover, given the state of things, "the political economy of media has been rejuvenated." There's a growing media reform movement. In it are scholars, activists, students, and ordinary people comprising "one of the striking developments of our time."

Neoliberalism is discredited. It violates essential human desires and needs. It's beyond repair, and it inspired "the idea of imagining a more humane and democratic social order." It's showing up in places like Venezuela. Political economists of media have a role in spreading it. Communication systems are vital to do it, and digital age technology potentially can make it explode. Assuring Net Neutrality is key, but alone not enough.

Giant telecommunications and cable companies want to prevent it. They aim to privatize the Internet, charge big for everything, and control its content. The issue remains unresolved, but the public can't afford to lose this one because real democracy depends on a free and open media.

More policy battles remain as well and will become “more pronounced in the digital era.” McChesney cites three:

— what passes today for journalism; it’s “in a deep and prolonged crisis (because of) corporate cutbacks and erosion of standards;”

— hyper-commercialism is getting more hyper; it’s all-pervasive; derailing it is crucial; the public’s role vital; and

— digital revolution technology cuts both ways; it empowers people, yet entraps them as well; it makes everyone vulnerable to surveillance; increasingly, there’s nowhere left to hide.

Key is making digital technology work for, not against us and keeping private for-profit interests from controlling it. The “most important work of the political economy of media” is thus: “understanding and navigating the central relationship of communication to the broader economy and political system.” Ours is based on markets uber alles. It’s a failed ideology, yet no fit topic for open and public discussion. That has to change, and barriers have to come down to show how predatory capitalism really is, how harmful it is to the greater good, and what humane alternatives exist. It can only be through a free and open mass media. Communication is essential, and “political economists of media (are) at the heart” of using it constructively and justly.

McChesney’s book is long, detailed, crystal clear in its message, essential to read in total, and kept as a key reference guide to the media’s problems and how to fix them. This review covers a sampling of the book’s contents, selective offerings in it. It’s to energize readers to get the book and discover it all.

The Problem of Journalism

Real democracy needs superior journalism to “comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable,” and function as a “rigorous watchdog (over) those in power.” Today in the mainstream, not a shred of it exists, but it wasn’t always that way.

Politically neutral, nonpartisan, professional or objective journalism was unthinkable in the republic’s first few generations. Journalism’s job was to inform, persuade, and, yet be highly partisan by providing a wide range of opinions. At the same time, newspaper publishing changed “from being primarily political to being primarily commercial” because of growing advertising revenues. Competition flourished, cities like St. Louis had at least 10 dailies until the late 19th century, and they represented their owners’ politics.

The post-Restruction Gilded Age changed things. Concentrated wealth was its hallmark, the press became less competitive, commercialism flourished, and corruption followed along with yellow journalistic sensationalism to generate sales. At the same time, socialists, feminists, abolitionists, trade unionists and various radical types avoided the mainstream and established their own media to advance their interests.

From the Gilded Age’s onset through the early 20th century Progressive Era, “an institutional sea change transpired in US media.” Newspapers consolidated into fewer chains in fewer hands, and most communities ended up with one or two dailies. At the same time, the “dissident press” lost much of its following and influence. It created a crisis in early 20th century journalism.

Yet, during the Progressive Era, muckraking journalism proliferated to a degree never again equalled. Reformers like Robert LaFollete called the commercial press destructive to democracy, and historian Henry Adams (grandson and great grandson of two former presidents) was unsparing in his criticism. He said “The press is the hired agent of a moneyed system, set up for no other reason than to tell lies where the interests are concerned.”

The era produced and inspired critics like Upton Sinclair. He produced cutting-edge works like The Jungle taking on meatpacking plant abuses and The Brass Check that was “the first great systematic critique of….capitalist journalism.” Other great figures were George Seldes who produced scathing media critiques, IF Stone, Lincoln Steffens, and a host of notables mostly unknown and unread today.

Professional journalism came of age at this time with schools established to “train a cadre professional editors and reporters.” They were taught to “sublimate their own values,” produce “neutral and unbiased copy,” and (likely) greater revenues for publishers.

In fact, “neutral” content was a non-starter. As journalism evolved in the country, publishers wanted their values expressed. It’s all about business and profits, and journalists had to internalize these ideas to stay employed. As a result, “three deep-seated biases” are in the “professional code,” and they’re more prominent than ever today:

— professional journalists regard whatever government, business, or other prominent figures say or do as legitimate news;

— conflicting sources are ignored so power figures set the agenda and are uncontested; journalists become stenographers to them, and a free press is “guaranteed only to those who own one;”

— most important, journalism reflects the views and aims of the ruing class; “we the people” are nowhere in sight.

It means fiction substitutes for fact, news is carefully “filtered,” dissent marginalized, and supporting the powerful substitutes for full and accurate reporting. As a result, aggressive wars are called liberating ones, civil liberties are suppressed for our own good, patriotism means going along with crimes of state, and vast corporate malfeasance becomes just a few bad apples.

Professional journalism in the US, “hit its high-water mark….from the 1950s into the 1970s, but it was lots different from today. We had Cronkite then. Now it’s Couric, and that’s one part of a greater problem. But even in its “golden age,” owners’ interests came first. A “virtual Sicilian code of silence” protected the wealthy and powerful. Even so, a few good journalists stood out and still do, but they don’t show up often and never on the New York Times’ front page or any other major broadsheet. As for television, media giants no longer even pretend to provide real journalism. We’ve sunk that low in an age of technological wonders, but none used for the greater good. The more channels we get, the less there is to watch – less of any worth, that is.

In the 20th century’s early decades, media owners and journalists vied to shape what content was permitted. By mid-century, however, the battle was over. Media giants prevailed. They consolidated and grew more dominant, and the idea of giving news divisions

more autonomy made increasingly less sense. Bottom line considerations took over, and journalism, or what passes for it, "became subjected to (increasing) commercial regimentation."

New technologies emerged. Cable and satellite TV arrived, and with them the proliferation of channels. A handful carry round-the-clock news. The hours have to be filled, but what passes for information is sensationalist pseudo-journalism and fluff. Truth is distorted or omitted. Juiced-up reports on murder, mayhem, mishaps, and celebrity gossip predominate, and entertainers and low-paid teleprompter readers impersonate news people.

Target audiences are middle and upper class earners. In contrast, workers and the poor are left out. Little or no reporting shows up on their issues, but business programming has proliferated. Regrettably, it hasn't subjected commercial interests to hard scrutiny. Instead, reporters are paid touts, and their work is "rah-rah capitalism," and it "teem(s) with reverence for the accumulation of wealth." It let 2001 and 2002 corporate scandals go unreported until they got too big to ignore. They bilked investors of multi-billions. Many thousands lost jobs, pensions and benefits, but a mere handful of fraudsters were held to account. The media "missed the developing story in toto."

The alternative press and Ralph Nader spotted trouble in the mid-1990s. It developed into a major news story and an enormous political scandal with the president and vice-president linked by their association with Enron. Teapot Dome and Watergate made heads roll. This one didn't lay a glove on politicians because Democrats were as tainted as Republicans so they laid low.

The media happily obliged. They're giant businesses and members in good standing in the corporate community with interlocking interests and shared political values. In addition, a number of their executives were investigated for fraud. They included Disney's Michael Eisner, News Corporation's Rupert Murdoch, Charter Communications, Vivendi Universal, AOL Time Warner for cooking its books, and Adelphi Communications for "orchestrating one of the largest frauds to take place at a US public company." At the end of an epic scandal, corporations got off with "bloodied noses and sullied reputations, but little more."

Consider a "broader political-economic pressure….to market news to target audiences." In a largely depoliticized society, there's less demand for political journalism and every incentive for professional journalists to avoid controversy. Real reporting is dumbed down. Trivia substitutes for hard news, and local TV stations have been discontinuing news programming altogether. Walter Cronkite wonders if democracy can "even survive."

It's in this climate that editorial budgets are lowballed. Everything has to be profit-justified, and surveys show journalists are "a grumpy lot" because of bottom line pressures delivering low pay, no raises, job insecurity, and pretty grim expectations for their future prospects. The growth of media giants makes it worse. Consolidation lets companies spread their editorial budgets across different media so one reporter can do the same job for a newspaper, web site, TV and radio station or wherever else owners' directives demand.

A striking development is the rise of the PR industry. It's a cheap substitute for real news. All of it is hype and fake. Its content for a corporate and government clientele, and it comes in the form of "slick press releases, paid-for experts….bogus citizens groups, canned new events," and surveys show this amounts to from 40 to 70% of what passes for "news." But the public thinks it's real.

Except in times of war, international coverage also disappears. So has investigative journalism. It was once the "hallmark of feisty 'Fourth Estate' journalism in a free society." Now it's almost extinct and for the same reason overseas reporting is gone – it's expensive, and bottom-line considerations won't tolerate it.

With real journalism absent and a culture committed to commercialism, truth is out the window. Officials can lie with impunity. So can business fraudsters, and McChesney calls it "a scoundrel's paradise." Professional standards are relaxed, and it forces journalists to shape stories for their owners and advertisers. Today, news departments "cooperate with advertisers to co-promote events and use advertisers as experts in stories." It comes in two forms:

— direct commercial penetration of news; it corrupts its integrity; is in the form of bribes to write stories, host commercial events, and overall act as a proxy for an advertiser and be well paid for it; and

— journalists reporting favorably on their owners' commercial operations, such as ABC News promoting a Disney film or NBC News selling the Winter Olympics; this proliferates; it's called "synergy; for journalists with integrity it's "poison."

Consider another issue – the so-called "liberal media" bias. It's bogus but resonates because hard right flacks push it. Their critique is fourfold and largely bogus:

— journalists have "decisive power;" owners and advertisers are marginalized;

— journalists (by their nature) are political liberals;

— journalists use their position to advance liberal ideas; and

— objective journalism would report conservative views.

The first and last points especially are rubbish. Successful journalists internalize their owners' values. Bosses have power, journalists don't. On issues where journalists lean left, it's where bottom-line considerations aren't affected – women's, gay, lesbian and abortion rights, civil liberties, affirmative action, and so forth. Overall, journalists are pro-business, and why not. Successful ones get good salaries and benefits, and enjoy the fruits of their celebrity.

So how can the bashing go on? Because it resonates and has "tremendous emotional power…." It began in the 1970s. It was an effort to tilt news rightward. It aimed to foster conservative values, train a cadre of appararatchiks, establish conservative think tanks, and hammer all anti-conservative coverage as "liberal" bias.

It's works and makes news reporting more sympathetic to business and right wing politics. Republicans got more powerful. Democrats partnered with them. Journalists play ball with their bosses, and those most pro-business are held in highest regard. The combination of "conservative ideology and commercialized, depoliticized journalism" defines the problem of the media today.

How to Think About Journalism: Looking Backward, Going Forward

American journalism has been sinking for decades. Now it's in crisis. The stakes couldn't be

higher. Without viable journalism, democracy is impossible, tyranny takes over and when full-blown needs revolutionary disruption to uproot. Constructive action is needed now, and "the political economy of media is uniquely positioned to provide" it.

The starting point – democratic journalism to hold those in power (and wannabes) accountable. It must separate truth from lies and provide a wide range of informed opinions on the cutting-edge issues of our times. By this standard, today's dominant media fails, and that's putting it mildly.

Journalism is co-opted and corrupted. Commercialism gutted it. Investigative journalism is a memory. Political and international reporting no longer exist. The same is true for local reporting, and all that's left is "the absurd horse race" campaign coverage of endless polls and he said, she said along with pseudo-journalistic celebrity features and the rest. For the most part, it's impossible getting real news and information in the mainstream.

The media keeps sinking lower. We've been heading there for decades, but things came to a head post-9/11. The "war on terror" began. Wars without end followed, and the dominant media hyped them. They were hawkish and giddy championing aggressive wars, international law violations, repressive legislation, and at the same time silencing dissent.

Anti-war became anti-American, and nowhere was the trumpeting greater or with more effect than on The New Times front page. Its star reporter Judith Miller led the charge. She'll forever be remembered as lead stenographer to power. Without her headlined coverage (little more than Pentagon and administration handouts), there might not have been an Iraq war, even though she had plenty of help selling it.

"For a press system, (war reporting) is its moment of truth." In 2002, 2003 to the present, it was nowhere in sight. In reporting on the war, its run-up and current occupation, the major media sunk to its lowest ever depth. They flacked the pro-war line, still support it unconditionally, and tout the idea that America is benevolent and our intentions honorable.

The notion is preposterous, indefensible and disastrous. And professional journalism is to blame. It's in crisis, and it's important to ask why. The industry cites the Internet, its liberating power, unleashing of new competition, and taking away advertisers. Their solution – cut budgets, report less, and consolidate for even greater size and dominance. Rubbish.

Journalistic standards were in disrepair long before the Internet and for reasons discussed above – internalizing media owners' commercial values, or else. It means a little autonomy is allowed but increasingly less as the giants got bigger. They got a huge boost with the passage of the monstrous 1996 Telecommunications Act. It was grand theft media, a colossal giveaway, and a major piece of anti-consumer legislation hugely detrimental to the public interest. It let broadcast giants own twice as many local TV stations as before. It was ever sweeter for radio with all national limits on station ownership removed and greater local market penetration also allowed. Current TV station owners were handed new digital television broadcast spectrum, and cable companies got the right to increase their monopoly positions. Media and telecom giants were winners. Consumers and working journalists lost out.

Professional journalism's "core problem" became more pronounced – relying on "official sources" as legitimate news, blocking out dissent, leaving out the public altogether, and relying more than ever on fake PR releases without checking their truth.

Given the state of crisis, alternatives are needed, and critics "whose analysis (have) been on the mark the longest" are the ones to look to for answers. They've deconstructed the current system, understand how it's broken, and know what's needed to fix it. For starters, structure matters. So do institutions. They shape media content everywhere. They transmit values that become internalized and a requirement to rise to the top, or even stay employed.

From political economy of media research, McChesney cites four "propositions to guide understanding, scholarship, and action:"

— media systems aren't "natural" or "inevitable;" they result from explicit policies and subsidies; no mandate says only for-profit ones are allowed; a professional journalism "core principle" is for a public service "safe house….in the swamp of commercialism;"

— the First Amendment isn't to grant special favors to communication sector investors alone; a strong argument can be made for government to structure the media; Supreme Court decisions don't equate a free press with commercialism; they support the state's right and duty to make a viable free press possible; without it, "the entire constitutional process" fails;

— the dominant US media system is for-profit, but it's not a free market system; the media giants get enormous direct and indirect subsidies amounting to many hundreds of billions of dollars; they cut both ways; they can be beneficial when they serve the greater good; for decades, rarely have any been directed that way;

— structuring the media should be over subsidy and policy choices, what institutions they'll support, and what values they'll encourage and promote; over time, the process grew more undemocratic; the public is completely left out; the FCC is the industry's handmaiden; and the idea that free markets give people what they want is rubbish.

Consider the evidence. Communication and technology firms spend more on lobbying than any other sector or group. The largest firms assign a lobbyist to each important congressional committee member. They also spend millions in campaign contributions and for PR. Combine this with the "golden revolving door." Key government officials, aides and FCC members move on to lucrative private sector jobs as reward for their considerations while in government.

Here's more evidence:

— the indefensible "immaculate conception" notion that the US media system arose "naturally;" in fact, powerful figures created it for commercial interests; and

— the amount of public subsidies debunks the "free market" myth; consider the term "deregulation" as well; in communications, it's pure propaganda for an industry with less, not more competition; under it, great journalism is impossible; the system has to be overhauled, and doing it will take enlightened government policies in a much different operating environment.

What's needed is a "range of structures that can provide for the information needs of the people (with) as much openness, freedom, and diversity as possible. That is freedom of the press."

More than ever today, US history is clear. We need a journalism-producing sector "walled off from corporate and commercial pressures." Government has to be involved. It's most important for the Internet and digital revolution. Left to market forces, they'll be co-opted for profit. Communication giants will control it, charge to the max, censor it, invade our privacy, spy on us, and carpet bomb us with commercialized everything. McChesney is bluntly realistic. Unless we take proactive steps and stop this, "we may come to regret the day the computer was invented."

Consider other policy considerations as well. For the Internet to provide free speech and a free press, "it has to be ubiquitous, high speed, and inexpensive." Much like other essentials, we need broadband access "as a civil right" for everyone – for political, cultural and economic reasons. Other developed countries are way ahead of us. It's shameful and must change. Telecom giants won't do it. Government has to. It has to quash industry efforts to privatize the Internet, preserve Network Neutrality, keep the Internet open and free, and McChesney puts it this way. "The future of a free press (depends on) ubiquitous, inexpensive, and super-fast Internet access as well as Network Neutrality."

But that alone won't solve journalism's crisis. It'll take resources and institutional support. The Internet is wondrous, but not magic. It won't make communication giants amenable to change or transform bad journalism to what serves the public interest. Even so, the blogosphere has potential. Citizen journalism is flourishing. Over time it can increase, and with public support can flourish. But it won't replace full-time professional journalists and the vast audiences they reach. And it's equally important to have competing newsrooms, far more than now operate. The problems are great. No magic bullet will solve them, but McChesney offers suggestions. Besides what's above, he lists:

— policies that "more aggressively shape the media system" – antitrust and communication laws for more diverse ownership; 19th century-style postal subsidies to encourage a broader range of publications; and most important a viable nonprofit, noncommercial real public and community access broadcasting, not the government and corporate-controlled kind from NPR and PBS;

— the problem of the Internet allowing Americans "to construct a personalized media world;" it leads to "group polarization" – sharing common experiences selectively, becoming less informed, respectful and more distrusting of outsiders; journalism is key for Americans for a viable democracy; public media provide it best, and they may influence commercial areas;

— a more radical solution – policies that encourage local and employee ownership, and/or community daily newspaper ownership; within a generation, they'll be largely digital and indistinguishable from other media forms.

McChesney cites an imperative – to "conduct research on alternative policies and structures (to) generate journalism and quality media content." Over a decade ago, a $100 tax rebate idea was proposed. It would let people donate it to any nonprofit news medium choice and could potentially raise hundreds of billions of dollars. It was considered radical then, but no longer. It could launch a real alternative media with public benefits not now available. It would also be an antidote to what McChesney calls "a steady diet of (mainstream) crap" that's dulled the public appetite for great journalism.

His criticism doesn't repudiate the political economy of media. It completes it and its

analysis of journalism. On one side are the firms, owners, labor practices, market structures, policies, occupational codes, and subsidies. Its opposite examines journalism as a whole, the media system as well, and how they interact with broad social and economic relations in society. Where inequality exists, depoliticization is encouraged by those on top.

The political economy of media requires enhancing participatory democracy. In turn, it needs great journalism and media systems. An informed and engaged citizenry as well. Journalism needs democracy, and the reverse is true. They also depend on "media reform and broader movements for social justice (that will) rise and fall together."

More on The Political Economy of Media follows in Part II. Watch for it soon on this web site.

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