

Making Media Democratic

By Robert W. McChesney

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The American media system is spinning out of control in a hyper-commercialized frenzy. Fewer than ten transnational media conglomerates dominate much of our media; fewer than two dozen account for the overwhelming majority of our newspapers, magazines, films, television, radio, and books. With every aspect of our media culture now fair game for commercial exploitation, we can look forward to the full-scale commercialization of sports, arts, and education, the disappearance of notions of public service from public discourse, and the degeneration of journalism, political coverage, and children's programming under commercial pressure.

For democrats, this concentration of media power and attendant commercialization of public discourse are a disaster. An informed, participating citizenry depends on media that play a public service function. As James Madison once put it, "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." But these democratic functions lie beyond the reach of the current American media system. If we are serious about democracy, then, we need to work aggressively for reform.

What kind of reform? In broad terms, we need to reduce the current degree of media concentration, and, more immediately, blunt its effects on democracy. More specifically, we need special incentives for nonprofits, broadcast regulation, public broadcasting, and antitrust. I present these proposals as the start of a debate about media reform, not as ultimate solutions. I am sure that spirited discussion will improve these ideas: my immediate concern is to get that discussion started. I will not dwell here on the weaknesses of the current US media system, beyond summarizing arguments that I (and many others) have made elsewhere. The point here is to begin answering the natural follow-up to such criticisms: "If the status quo is so bad, what do you propose that would be better?"

Media and Democracy

The case for media reform is based on two propositions. First, *media perform essential political, social, economic, and cultural functions in modern democracies*. In such societies, media are the principal source of political information and access to public debate, and the key to an informed, participating, self-governing citizenry. Democracy requires a media system that provides people with a wide range of opinion and analysis and debate on important issues, reflects the diversity of citizens, and promotes public accountability of the powers-that-be and the powers-that-want-to-be. In short, the media in a democracy must foster deliberation and diversity, and ensure accountability.

Second, *media organization-patterns of ownership, management, regulation, and subsidy-- is a central determinant of media content*. This proposition is familiar from discussions of media in China and the former Soviet Union. For those countries, the idea that the media could promote deliberation, diversity, and accountability, while being effectively owned and controlled by the Communist Party, was not even worth refuting. Similarly, we are not surprised to hear that when cronies of the Mexican government owned the country's only TV station, television news coverage was especially favorable to the ruling party.

In the United States, in contrast, analysis of the implications of private ownership and advertising support for media content has been limited. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, Americans have heard that we have no reason to be concerned about corporate ownership of media or dependence on commercial advertising because market competition forces commercial media to "give the people what they want," and journalistic professionalism protects the news from the biases of owners and advertisers as well as journalists themselves.

Such views now seem very dubious. Consider first the alleged benefits of competition. The main media markets-- film, TV, magazines, music, books, cable, newspapers-- are all oligopolies or semi-monopolies with severe barriers to new entrants. Moreover, media economics make it virtually impossible for a firm to be dominant in

just one sector. Because of opportunities that come with having properties in different media markets, the largest media firms all have rushed to establish conglomerates over the past decade. Time Warner, for example, is one of the top five US or global leaders in film production, TV show production, cable TV channels, cable TV systems, movie theater ownership, book publishing, music, and magazine publishing. It also has amusement parks, retail stores, and professional sport teams. Disney, too, seems to have mastered the logic of conglomeration: its animated films *Pocahontas* and *Hunchback of Notre Dame* were only marginal successes at the box office, with roughly \$100 million in gross US revenues, but both films will generate close to \$500 million in profit for Disney, once it has exploited all other venues: TV shows on its ABC network and cable channels, amusement park rides, comic books, CD-ROMs, CDs, and merchandising (through 600 Disney retail stores). Firms without these options simply cannot compete in this market, which is why animation is the province of only the largest media giants. This example is extreme, but it sharply underscores the fundamental principle.

These observations about conglomeration, however, barely begin to explain just how noncompetitive the media market is-if we take "competitive" in the economics textbook sense. Firms in specific markets do directly compete, at times ferociously. But these firms are also each other's best customers, as when a film studio sells its product for presentation to a broadcast network's cable channel. Moreover, to reduce risk and competition, the largest media firms have turned to "equity joint ventures" in the 1990s. Under such arrangements, media giants share the ownership of a specific media project: Fox Sports Net is jointly owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and John Malone's TCI; the Comedy Central cable channel is co-owned by Time Warner and Viacom. Murdoch explains the logic behind joint ventures as only he can: "We can join forces now, or we can kill each other and then join forces." The nine largest American media firms have, on average, joint ventures with nearly six of the other eight giants. Murdoch's News Corp. has at least one joint venture with every single one of them.

In such noncompetitive markets, the claim that media firms "give the people what they want" is unconvincing. The firms have enough market power to dictate the content that is most profitable for them. And the easy route to profit comes from increasing commercialism-larger numbers of ads, greater say for advertisers over non-advertising content, programming that lends itself to merchandising, and all sorts of cross promotions with non-media firms. Consumers may not want such hyper-commercialism, but they have little say in the matter. So we have a 50 percent increase in the number of commercials on network TV in the past decade; the development of commercially-saturated kids' programming as arguably the fastest-growing and most profitable branch of the TV industry in the 1990s; becoming standard in motion pictures. The flip side of this commercialism is the decline of public service-of the notion that there is any purpose to our media except to make money for shareholders.

Under such conditions, journalistic norms can hardly be expected to stem the commercial tide. Contemporary commercial journalism is essentially a mix of crime stories, celebrity profiles, consumer news pitched at the upper middle class, and warmed over press releases. Bookstores are filled with dispirited reports by former editors and journalists bemoaning the brave new world of corporate journalism. Journalist unions are very important in this regard, by protecting journalistic norms from the commercial interests of the owners. But without other measures to weaken corporate media power, unions are not likely to be able to resist pressures from the current media system.

For democrats, then, media competition and journalistic norms do not suffice for deliberation, diversity, and accountability. If media are central to the formation of a participating and informed citizenry, and if media organization influences media performance, then issues about ownership, regulation, and subsidy need to be matters of public debate. But such debate has been almost non-existent in the United States. Even in broadcasting, where the publicly owned airwaves are licensed to private users, the public has never had any meaningful participation in the formation of policy.

Consider the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The law it replaced, the Communications Act of 1934, regulated telephony, radio, and television. The 1996 Act provides the basis for determining the course of radio, television, telephony, the Internet-indeed virtually all aspects of communication as we shift over to digital technologies. Its guiding premise is that the market should rule communication, with government assistance. The politics of the Act consisted largely of powerful corporate communication firms and lobbies fighting behind the scenes to get the most favorable wording. That the corporate sector would control all communication was a given; the only

fight was over which sectors and which firms would get the best deals. The public was for the most part unaware of these debates. The drafting and struggles over the Telecommunications Act of 1996 were hardly discussed in the news media, except in the business and trade press, where the legislation was covered as a story of importance to investors and managers, not citizens, or even consumers.

The results of the Telecommunications Act, with its relaxation of ownership restrictions to promote competition across sectors, have been little short of disastrous. Rather than produce competition, a far-fetched notion in view of the concentrated nature of these markets, the law has paved the way for the greatest period of corporate concentration in US media and communication history. The seven Baby Bells are now four-if the SBC Communications purchase of Ameritech goes through-with more deals on the way. In radio, where ownership restrictions were relaxed the most, the entire industry has been in upheaval, with 4,000 of the 11,000 commercial stations being sold since 1996. In the 50 largest markets, three firms now control access to over half the radio audience. In 23 of those 50 markets, the three largest firms control 80 percent of the radio audience. The irony is that radio, which is relatively inexpensive and thus ideally suited to local independent control, has become perhaps the most concentrated and centralized medium in the United States.

No doubt the United States needed a new communications law. Digital technologies are undermining the traditional distinctions between media and communication sectors that formed the basis for earlier communication regulation. But the legislation we ended up with reflects the failed process that produced it.

False Starts

Because corporate control and the role of advertising are effectively off-limits to public discussion, reformers have faced limited options. Hence they have tended to press for mild reforms that do not threaten corporate and advertiser hegemony. And because these mild reforms generate little enthusiasm from the broad public, media activists have put little effort into organizing popular support for their efforts. The result is an "inside-the-beltway," low-political-stakes style of public interest lobbying. For example, in 1997 some media activists claimed victory when the Federal Communications Commission began requiring broadcasters to do three hours a week of educational programming for kids. The problem with this "victory" was that these educational programs would all remain commercially sponsored with ultimate control in the hands of business interests.

Other reformers have turned to "civic" or "public" journalism, a well-intentioned attempt to reduce the sensationalism and blatant political manipulation of mainstream journalism. Unfortunately, the movement completely ignores the structural factors of ownership and advertising that have led to the attack on journalism. Public journalism, not surprisingly, is averse to "ideological" approaches to the news, and therefore encourages a boringly "balanced" and soporific newsfare. Claiming to give readers news they think is important to their lives, advocates of public journalism may in fact be assisting in the process of converting journalism into the type of consumer news and information that delights the advertising community.

Still others have joined the media literacy movement. The idea here is to educate people to be skeptical and knowledgeable users of the media. Media literacy has considerable potential so long as it involves explaining how the media system actually works, and leads people to work for a better system. But a more conventional wing of the movement implicitly accepts that commercial media "give the people what they want." So the media literacy crowd's job is to train people to demand better fare. The resulting strategy may simply help to prop up the existing system. "Hey, don't blame us for the lousy stuff we provide," the corporate media giants will say. "We even bankrolled media literacy to train people to demand higher quality fare. The morons simply demanded more of what we are already doing."

While media literacy has an important role to play in media reform, civic journalism has been at best a mixed blessing. Some observers credit civic journalism, which is widespread in North Carolina, with helping in Jesse Helms's 1996 re-election. Why? Because civic journalism was ill-equipped to generate tough questions, or press politicians to answer them. So Helms got a cakewalk from the press, barely having to defend his record.

The evidence is clear: if we want a media system that produces fundamentally different results, we need solutions that address the causes of the problems; have to address issues of media ownership, management, regulation, and subsidy. Our goal should be to craft a media system that reduces the power of a handful of enormous corporations and advertisers to dominate the media culture. But no one will press for reform until we

have some ideas worth debating. The ultimate trump card of the status quo is the claim that any change in our media system will invariably lead to darkness at noon. The purpose of the balance of this article is to establish that there are indeed several workable proposals for media reform that will expand, not contract, freedom and will energize our culture and democracy.

Media Reform Proposals

Building nonprofit and noncommercial media. The starting point for media reform is to build up a viable nonprofit, noncommercial media sector. Such a sector currently exists in the United States, and produces much of value, but it is woefully small and underfunded. It can be developed independent of changes in laws and regulations. For example, foundations and organized labor could and should contribute far more to the development of nonprofit and noncommercial media. Labor, in particular, has to be willing to subsidize radio, television, Internet, and print media. Moreover, labor cannot seek to micromanage these media and have them serve as its PR agents. For independent media to flourish, they must have editorial integrity.

Sympathetic government policies could also help foster a nonprofit media sector, and media reform must work to this end. Government subsidies and policies have played a key role in establishing lucrative commercial media. Since the 19th century, for example, the United States has permitted publications to have quality, high speed mailing at relatively low rates. We could extend this principle to lower mailing costs for a wider range of nonprofit media, and/or for media that have little or no advertising. Likewise we could permit all sorts of tax deductions or write-offs for contributions to nonprofit media. Dean Baker of the Economic Policy Institute has developed a plan for permitting taxpayers to take up to \$150 off their federal tax bill, if they donate the money to a nonprofit news medium. This would permit almost all Americans to contribute to nonprofit media-not just those with significant disposable incomes-and help create an alternative to the dominant Wall Street/Madison Avenue system.

Public Broadcasting. Establishing a strong nonprofit sector to complement the commercial giants is not enough. The costs of creating a more democratic media system simply are too high. Therefore, it is important to establish and maintain a noncommercial, nonprofit, public radio and television system. The system should include national networks, local stations, public access television, and independent community radio stations. Every community should also have a stratum of low-power television and micropower radio stations.

The United States has never experienced public broadcasting in the manner of Japan, Canada, and Western Europe. In contrast to the US, public broadcasting there has been well funded and commissioned to serve the entire population. In the United States, public broadcasting has always been underfunded, and effectively required to provide only programming that is not commercially viable. As a result, public broadcasters typically provide relatively unattractive programming to fringe audiences, hardly a strategy for institutional success. Moreover, Congress has been a watchdog to see that public broadcasting did not expand the range of ideological discourse beyond that provided by the commercial broadcasters. In sum, public broadcasting in the United States has been handcuffed since its inception. Still, it has developed a devoted following. This following has provided enough vocal political support to keep US public broadcasting from being effectively privatized, but most of this toothpaste is now out of the tube. Public radio and television are increasingly dependent upon corporate grants and "enhanced underwriting," a euphemism for advertising. The federal subsidy only accounts for some 15 percent of public broadcasting revenues. Indeed, public broadcasting, by the standard international definition, no longer exists in the United States. Instead, we have nonprofit commercial broadcasting, closely linked to the corporate sector, with the constant threat of right-wing political harassment if public stations step out of line.

We need a system of real public broadcasting, with no advertising, that accepts no grants from corporations or private bodies, and that serves the entire population, not merely those who are disaffected from the dominant commercial system and have to contribute during pledge drives. Two hurdles stand in the way of such a system. The first is organizational: How can public broadcasting be structured to make the system accountable and prevent a bureaucracy impervious to popular tastes and wishes, but to give the public broadcasters enough institutional strength to prevent implicit and explicit attempts at censorship by political authorities? The second is fiscal: Where will the funds come from to pay for a viable public broadcasting service? At present, the federal government provides \$260 million annually. The public system I envision-which would put per capita US spending in a league with, for example, Britain and Japan-may well cost \$5-10 billion annually.

There is no one way to resolve the organizational problem, and perhaps an ideal solution can never be found. But there are better ways, as any comparative survey indicates. One key element in preventing bureaucratic ossification or government meddling will be to establish a pluralistic system, with national networks, local stations, community and public access stations, all controlled independently. In some cases direct election of officers by the public and also by public broadcasting employees may be appropriate, whereas in other cases appointment by elected political bodies may be preferable. As for funding, I have no qualms about drawing the funds for fully public radio and television from general revenues. There is an almost absurd obsession with generating funds for public broadcasting from everywhere but the general budget, on the bogus premise that public broadcasting cannot be justified as a public expense. In view of radio and television's importance in our lives, it clearly deserves a smidgen of the money we use to build entirely unnecessary weapons systems. We subsidize education, but the government now subsidizes media only on behalf of owners. We should seek to have a stable source of funding, one that cannot be subject to manipulation by politicians with little direct interest in the integrity of the system.

A powerful public radio and television system could have a profound effect on our entire media culture. It could lead the way in providing the type of public service journalism that commercialism is now killing off. This might in turn give commercial journalists the impetus they need to pursue the hard stories they now avoid. It could have a similar effect upon our entertainment culture. A viable public TV system could support a legion of small independent filmmakers. It could do wonders for reducing the reliance of our political campaigns upon expensive commercial advertising. It is essential to ensuring the diversity and deliberation that lie at the heart of a democratic public sphere.

Regulation. A third main plank is to increase regulation of commercial broadcasting in the public interest. Media reformers have long been active in this arena, if only because the public ownership of the airwaves gives the public, through the FCC, a clear legal right to negotiate terms with the chosen few who get broadcast licenses. Still, even this form of media activism has been negligible, and broadcast regulation has been largely toothless, with the desires of powerful corporations and advertisers rarely challenged.

Experience in the United States and abroad indicates that if commercial broadcasters are not held to high public service standards, they will generate the easiest profits by resorting to the crassest commercialism, and will overwhelm the balance of the media culture. Moreover, standard-setting will not work if commercial broadcasters are permitted to "buy" their way out of public service obligations; the record shows that they will eventually find a way to reduce or eliminate these payments. Hence the most successful mixed system of commercial and public broadcasting in the world was found in Britain from the 1950s to the 1980s. It was successful because the commercial broadcasters were held to public service standards comparable to those employed by the BBC; some scholars even argue that the commercial system sometimes outperformed the BBC as a public service broadcaster. The British scheme worked because commercial broadcasters were threatened with loss of their licenses if they did not meet public service standards. (Regrettably, Thatcherism, with its mantra that the market can do no wrong, has undermined the integrity of the British broadcasting system.)

In three particular areas, broadcast regulation can be of great importance. First, advertising should be strictly regulated or even removed from all children's programming (as in Sweden). We must stop the commercial carpetbombing of our children. Commercial broadcasters should be required to provide several hours per week of ad-free kids' programming, to be produced by artists and educators, not Madison Avenue hotshots.

Second, television news should be taken away from the corporate chiefs and the advertisers and turned over to journalists. Exactly how to organize independent ad-free children's and news programming on commercial television so that it is under the control of educators, artists, and journalists will require study and debate. But we should be able to set up something that is effective.

As for funding this public service programming, I subscribe to the principle that it should be subsidized by the beneficiaries of commercialized communication. This principle might be applied in several ways. We could charge commercial broadcasters rent on the electromagnetic spectrum they use to broadcast. Or we could charge them a tax whenever they sell the stations for a profit. In combination these mechanisms could generate well over a billion dollars annually. Or we could tax advertising. Some \$200 billion will be spent to advertise in

the United States in 1998, \$120 billion of which will be in the media. A very small sales tax on this or even only on that portion that goes to radio and television could generate several billion dollars. It might also have the salutary effect of slowing down the commercial onslaught on American social life. And it does not seem like too much to ask of advertisers who are permitted otherwise to marinate most of the publicly owned spectrum in commercialism.

Third, political candidates should receive considerable free airtime on television during electoral campaigns. In addition, paid TV advertising by candidates should either be strictly regulated or banned outright, as the exorbitant cost of these ads (not to mention their lame content) has virtually destroyed the integrity of electoral democracy here. If they cannot be banned, or even reduced by regulation, then perhaps a provision should be made that if a candidate purchases a TV ad, his or her opponents will all be entitled to free ads of the same length on the same station immediately following the paid ad. This would prevent rich candidates from buying elections. I suspect it would pretty much eliminate the practice altogether.

Even in these pro-market times, the corporate media have been unable to rid the public of its notion that commercial broadcasters should be required to serve the public as well as shareholders and advertisers. Hence, when commercial broadcasters were able to force the FCC in 1997 to give them (at no cost) massive amounts of new spectrum so they could begin digital TV broadcasting, the Clinton administration established the Gore Commission to recommend public service requirements to be met by broadcasters in return for this gift. Following the contours of US media politics, the Gore Commission has been little short of a farce, with several industry members stonewalling all but the lamest proposals. But we can hope that the Gore Commission will generate some more serious public service proposals, and provide the basis for a public education campaign and subsequent legislation to give them the force of law.

Antitrust. The fourth strategy for creating a more democratic media system is to break up the largest firms and establish more competitive markets, thus shifting some control from corporate suppliers to citizen consumers. By all accounts, the current antitrust statutes are not satisfactory, and if antitrust is ever to be applied to media it will require a new statute, similar in tone to the seminal Clayton and Sherman Acts, that lays out the general values to be enforced by the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission. The objective should be to break up such media conglomerates as Time Warner, News Corporation, and Disney, so that their book publishing, magazine publishing, TV show production, movie production, TV stations, TV networks, amusement parks, retail store chains, cable TV channels, cable TV systems, etc. all become independent firms. With reduced barriers-to-entry in these specific markets, new firms could enter.

The media giants claim that their market power and conglomeration make them more efficient and therefore able to provide a better product at lower prices to the consumer. There is not much evidence for these claims, though it is clear that market power and conglomeration make these firms vastly more profitable. Moreover, even if one accepts that antitrust would lead to a less efficient economic model, perhaps we should pay that price to establish a more open and competitive marketplace. In view of media's importance for democratic politics and culture, they should not be judged by purely commercial criteria.

Antitrust is the wild card in the media reform platform. It has tremendous appeal across the population and is usually the first idea citizens suggest when they are confronted with the current media scene. But it is unclear whether antitrust legislation could be effectively implemented. And even if it does prove effective, the system would remain commercial, albeit more competitive. It would not, in other words, reduce the need for the first three proposals.

Not to Worry?

The fundamental flaws in our corporate-dominated, commercial media system are widely appreciated. Unfortunately, there is also a rush to assert that the Internet should silence our fears. Because the Internet is open to all at relatively low prices, the hegemony of media giants and advertisers will soon end, to be replaced by a wide-open, decentralized, diverse, fast-changing, and competitive media culture. Best of all, this result is implicit in the Internet's digital network technology, and will not require government regulation. Indeed, the mainstream consensus—strongly endorsed by the Clinton administration's Internet policy—is that government regulation alone could prevent the Internet from working its magic.

Though the Internet and digital communication in general are certainly creating a radical change in our media and communication systems, the results may not be a more competitive market or more democratic media. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that as the Internet becomes a commercial medium, the largest media firms are most likely to succeed. The media giants can plug digital programming from their other ventures into the Web at little extra cost. To generate an audience, they can promote their Web sites incessantly on their traditional media holdings. The leading media "brands" have been the first to charge subscription fees for their Web offerings; indeed, they may be the only firms for which this is even an alternative. The media giants can (and do) arrange to have their advertisers agree to advertise on their Web sites. The media giants can also use their market power and brand names to get premier position in Web browser software. The new Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0 offers 250 highlighted channels, and the "plum positions" belong to Disney and Time Warner. Netscape and Pointcast are making similar arrangements. Moreover, approximately half the venture capital for Internet content start-up companies comes from established media firms; they want to be able to capitalize on profitable new applications as they emerge. In addition, the evidence suggests that in the commercialized Web, advertisers will have increased leverage over content because of the number of choices before them.

When these market considerations are taken together, it is difficult to imagine the growth of a competitive digital media marketplace in which small suppliers overwhelm corporate giants. Digital communication will cause considerable dislocation, but not a revolution. And in the end, the content of the digital communication world will appear quite similar to the content of the pre-digital world.

Ironically, the most striking feature of digital communication may well be not that it opened up competition in communication markets, but that it has promoted consolidation by undermining traditional distinctions between radio, television, telecommunication, and computer software. In the 1990s, almost all the media giants have entered into joint ventures or strategic alliances with the largest telecom and software firms. Time Warner is connected to several of the US regional (Bell) telephone giants, as well as to AT&T and Oracle. It has a major joint venture with US West. Disney, likewise, is connected to several major US telecommunication companies, as well as to America Online. News Corp. is partially owned by WorldCom (MCI) and has a joint venture with British Telecom. Microsoft, as one analyst noted, seems to be in bed with everyone. In due course the global media cartel may become something of a global communication cartel.

So how does the rise of the Internet alter my proposals for structural media reform? Very little. There are, of course, some specific policy reforms we should seek for the Internet: for example, guaranteeing universal public access at low rates, perhaps for free, and assuring links for nonprofit Web sites on the dominant browsers and commercial sites. But in general terms, we might do better to regard the Internet as the corporate media giants regard it: as part of the emerging media landscape, not its entirety. So when we create more and smaller media firms, when we create public and community radio and television networks and stations, when we create a strong public service component to commercial news and children's programming, when we use government policies to spawn a nonprofit media sector, all these efforts will have a tremendous effect on the Internet's development as a mass medium. Why? Because Web sites will not be worth much if they do not have the resources to provide a quality product. And all the new media that result from media reform will have Web sites as a mandatory aspect of their operations, much like the commercial media. By creating a vibrant and more democratic "traditional" media culture, we will go a long way toward doing the same with the Web.

Conclusion

Imagine a world in which scores, even hundreds, of media firms operate in markets competitive enough to permit new entrants. Imagine a world with large numbers of public, community, and public access radio and television stations and networks, with enough funding to produce high quality products. Imagine a world where the public airwaves provide compelling journalism, children's programming, and political candidate information, with control vested in people dedicated to public service. Imagine a world where creative government fiscal policies enable small nonprofit and noncommercial media to sprout and prosper, providing some semblance of a democratic public sphere.

Though imaginable, this world seems wholly implausible-and not only because of the political muscle of the corporate media and communications lobbies. Over the past generation, "free market" neoliberals have understood the importance of media as an instrument of social control far better than anyone else. The leading

conservative foundations have devoted considerable resources to reducing journalistic autonomy and ideological diversity and pushing media in a more explicitly pro-business direction. The pro-market political right understood that if big business dominated the main fora for political education and debate, then public scrutiny of business would be markedly reduced. These same "free market" foundations fight any public interest component to media laws and regulations, oppose any form of noncommercial and nonprofit media, and lead the battle to ensure that public broadcasting stays within narrow ideological boundaries. In short, we had a major political battle over media for the past generation, but only one side showed up. The results are clear, and appalling.

But now there are signs that the battle for the control of our media is about to be joined. Organizations such as Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), the media watch group, have boomed in the 1990s, and local media watch/media activism groups have blossomed in Denver, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle and elsewhere since 1995. In 1998 the Rainbow/PUSH coalition made media reform one of its two major organizing drives, holding regional conferences on the subject across the nation. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Progressive Caucus have agreed to draft and sponsor legislation in each of the areas mentioned earlier. Organized labor, especially media unions, have shown increased interest in and support for the issue. All of this would have been unthinkable only five years ago. It follows the trend around the world in the late 1990s, where media reform has become an indispensable part of democratic political movements. But we still have a long way to go. Large sectors of the population that are disadvantaged by the media status quo and who should be among media reform's strongest advocates-educators, librarians, parents, journalists, small businesses, laborers, artists, kids, political dissidents, progressive religious people, minorities, feminists, environmentalists-are scarcely aware that the issue even exists to be debated. The corporate media lobby is so strong that victory seems farfetched in the current environment, especially when the corporate news media show little interest in publicizing the issue.

Winning major media reform, then, will require the sort of political strength that comes with a broader social movement to democratize our society. We need to see that media reform is a staple of all progressive politics, not just a special interest cause. And media reform may have broad political appeal. Some "cultural conservatives" may be open to calls to reduce the hyper-commercialism of our media culture. And strongly pro-market democrats may recognize that media is an area where the crude application of market principles has produced disastrous "externalities." In sum, the train of media reform is leaving the station. If we value democracy we have no choice but to climb aboard.