

Media Capitalism, the State and 21st Century Media Democracy Struggles

An Interview with Robert McChesney

Tanner Mirrlees

In *The German Ideology*, Marx said the following about the media: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.” Since Marx’s time, “the means of mental production” in society have expanded into a globalizing capitalist media and cultural industry that encompasses both print and electronic mediums, news and entertainment. The media is a contradictory institution; it is once a means of production and a terrain of struggle. “The class that is the ruling material force of society” continues to rule the media and therefore is a very powerful “ruling intellectual force” in society. Yet, control of the media by the ruling class is being opposed by media democracy struggles.

Robert McChesney, eminent historian and political-economist of the media, founder of the Free Press, leading U.S. and international media activist, and author of *The Political Economy of the Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (Monthly Review Press, 2008) and *Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of the Media* (The New Press, 2008), spoke with Tanner Mirrlees, of the Socialist Project, about contemporary media capitalism and 21st century media democracy struggles to understand and change it.

THE MEDIA, THE LEFT AND POWER

TM: Why do you think it is important for progressives to understand the media and participate in media democracy struggles?

RM: The media is one of the key areas in society where power is exercised, reinforced and contested. It is hard to imagine a successful left political project that does not have a media platform. The media was not a major political issue for earlier generations of the Left. In the 19th century, a very different media system was in place. 19th century socialists wouldn’t be talking much about the need to criticize the *New York Herald Tribune* because they weren’t organizing people who read the *New York Herald Tribune*. It was much easier and more common for the Left to have its own media. The workers had worker papers. They weren’t consuming mass produced commercial media products. But this started changing in the first half of the 20th century. Capital accumulation colonized much more of popular culture and communications. Capitalism became the dominant mode of producing and distributing information in society. The media has since become central to politics; it is a central concern for anyone that wants to understand politics and intervene politically. The chal-

lenge for us is to understand, use and struggle to change the existing media.

TM: The corporate media play a dominant role in political struggles. Despite the power of the mainstream media, the Left still has its own media network. However, I worry that much Left media tends to be read almost exclusively by people that have already participated in or have a historical understanding of socialist struggles. How can we move from the level of building and maintaining our own Left media to engaging in a broader media struggle?

RM: In my experience and in the experience of others who study the media, we wrote articles and books that outlined the many problems of the corporate media. We critiqued the media. We gave many speeches. We came to a point where audiences asked: “what do we do about it?” “What should we do about the problem of the media?” There was a traditional Left response available at the time: “we understand that the media is not separate from, but an integral part of how capitalist power is upheld in society; when we make the revolution or the revolution just happens, the problem of the media will be resolved then.” This was an unsophisticated answer. Of course, very few people on the Left were that simplistic. Many understood that the battle over the media, just like the battle over the workplace, was a key part of engaging with and contesting power. Educating people about the media and fighting to make changes in the short-term, not just in the long term, became of utmost importance. Instead of waiting for the revolution to happen, we learned that unless you make significant changes in the media, it will be vastly more difficult to have a revolution. While the media is not the single most important issue in the world, it is one of the core issues that any successful Left project needs to integrate into its strategic program.

NETWORK NEUTRALITY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A PUBLIC INTERNET

TM: What are the most significant sites of political struggle for media democracy activists in the U.S. today?

RM: There are three overriding and connected issues that are central to media democracy activism in the United States.

The first issue is the Internet. The battle for network neutrality is to prevent the Internet from being privatized by telephone and cable companies. Privatization would give them control over the Internet, would allow these firms to privilege some information flows over others. We want to keep the Internet open. What we want to have in the U.S. and in every society is an Internet that is not private property, but a public utility. We want an Internet

where you don't have to have a password and that you don't pay a penny to use. It is your right to use the Internet. The benefits of a public Internet are numerous. It would end the digital divide, which remains a very serious problem in the U.S. and worldwide.

TM: What is the greatest obstacle to achieving network neutrality?

RM: The political influence of telephone and cable companies, which are state created monopolies. The one thing these companies are good at is buying off and controlling politicians. That is their "comparative advantage" over other firms. They are not any good at the actual business of telecommunications service provisioning. In the realm of Internet service provision, the telephone and cable companies play a parasitic and negative role. They do nothing positive. Their future is predicated on their ability to privatize the Internet and force people to use their version of it and pay an exorbitant highway robbery prices for that use. This applies to cell phones companies as well. All of these firms rank in the bottom five of the most hated industries in the country, with the banks and other predatory lenders. Their power rests upon their ability to successfully buy off politicians, just like the banks and predatory lenders. Our struggle to make the Internet into a public utility conflicts with the interests of telephone and cable firms. So it is a tough fight, but a very important one.

TM: Has the network neutrality struggle encountered any public resistance in the USA? American neoliberal ideology associates public utilities with "Big State control," a threat to the "free" marketplace. The belief is that there is an inherent antagonism between media capitalism and the U.S. state. But as your work shows, there is a big contradiction in this neoliberal ideology. You've highlighted how the large telephone and cable companies

currently arguing for the total privatization of digital communications using the slogan of the free-market mystify how their existence was and continues to be dependent upon U.S. government policy and regulation. Are U.S. citizens aware of the extent to which the U.S. state has always played a direct and indirect role in facilitating and legitimizing the corporate media system?

RM: They certainly would be if they were forced to read everything I've written. Fortunately, for a free society and unfortunately, for my book

sales, most people are not aware of this fact. Obviously, the last thing the phone and cable companies are going to do is publicize the fact that they are state-constructed monopolies and that their entire business model is based on owning politicians. They spread the myth that they are the victors of free-market competition. It is crucial that we expose and debunk this myth. We also need to reveal the price we pay for these state-created corporate monopolies, which exploit public subsidies.

Nevertheless, we have had much success around the net neutrality struggle. I expect within the next twelve months, we will have a formal law passed by U.S. Congress, signed by President Obama, and backed up by orders from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Network neutrality is well on its way to becoming the new law of the land.

TM: By making net neutrality the law of the land, is there any risk of lending support to the accumulation interests of digital capitalism's dominant corporations? Is the network neutrality fight also expressive of a rivalry between old media interests such as the telephone and cable companies and the interests of new media firms such as Google, eBay, Amazon, and Microsoft?

RM: Absolutely. One of the reasons we've been able to win this fight is that most of the new digital capital community is not supportive of the telephone and cable monopolies either. We have been in bed with some media companies that on other issues we are mortal enemies with. For a lot of people on the political Left who practice their politics on a barstool, we've committed a high-crime and misdemeanour for building a short-term alliance.

But I've learned, by participating in over a decade of specific media struggles, that when you are in the short-term and you are fighting to win, sometimes you make tactical alliances. You don't sacrifice your principles and embrace someone else's lame political agenda. If you want to win public credibility and advance a progressive media agenda that actually has a broad impact, this is what you do. That is how politics works. Most progressives understand this. But there is always going to be those who say: "here is a checklist of seven-hundred points that we think reflect the ideological foundations of the Left today. And everyone we work with is going to have to agree to all seven-hundred points or they are our enemies." This old approach to politics is paralyzing. You will never ever, in any circumstance, win any struggle at any time. That being said, we have a long way to go. At the moment, the battle over network neutrality is not to completely eliminate the telephone and cable companies. We are not at that point yet. But the ultimate goal is to get rid of the media capitalists in the phone and cable companies and to divest them from control.

THE NEWS CRISIS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

TM: A piece entitled "The Death and Life of Great American Newspapers" written by you and John Nichols was recently published in *The Nation* (April 6, 2009 edition). You describe in great detail the disintegration of U.S. news organizations and re-

veal how contemporary journalism is in crisis. Is the current crisis in journalism – the closure and downsizing of newspaper operations – related to new media technologies and the emergence of the Internet as a dominant source of information? Is there a relationship between the crisis of mainstream newspapers and the explosion of online alternative information sources?

RM: The Internet is one of the factors that brought news journalism to its knees. But it is not the only factor. Likewise, the world economic crisis is a very important factor, but not the only one. The Internet and the economic crisis are better understood as aggravating and accelerating a crisis with much deeper historical roots. Journalism was in trouble decades before the worldwide web was invented and long before the worldwide economic crisis reached its current stage. The crisis began before news advertising revenue was lost to craigslist. The real problem is the corporate consolidation and monopoly control over journalism, which began in the late 1960s and unfolded throughout the 70s. In highly profitable monopolistic news entities (newspaper firms and network broadcasters), media owners, seeking to make more money, began to cut newsroom staff and commercialize news values. By the 1980s there was already a huge crisis in U.S. news journalism. Journalists became despondent about the commercial pressures shaping their work. The Internet and the world economic crisis have only intensified this deeper crisis in journalism.

But there is another aspect too. Some might say that I am just harking back to the good old days before corporations consolidated control over journalism, that I am nostalgic for 1960s journalism and advocating a return to it. I am not. Even in the 1960s, American professional journalism was highly flawed. About one hundred years ago, the idea of “professional journalism” emerged as a direct response to the monopolization of newspapers. The idea of professional journalism was represented as form of self-regulation by monopolistic media owners. This was established to prevent public scrutiny of the inordinate control over journalism by media owners. The idea of professional journalism says: “you don’t need to worry about who owns and controls the media because the individual journalists are empowered professionals; journalists ultimately determine the quality and content of the news.” Furthermore, professional journalism in the U.S. has always been comfortable with corporate ownership, the dependency on advertising, and the status quo. The idea of professional journalism has been a very conservative force. It



gives working journalists the illusion that they are being fair, balanced, and neutral when reporting. In fact, the code of professionalism they abide by has built into it certain values that push them, almost unconsciously, in certain directions. This was as true in the 1960s as it is today. But the situation has become worse today because newsrooms have been gutted. There are fewer and fewer professional journalists trying to cover more and more new stories.

TM: What is to be done about the corporate control of the media and the current crisis facing journalism?

RM: We are at a very early stage in the process. In the U.S, there is a sort of religious attachment to the idea of “free-press,” which is taken to mean the state has absolutely no role to play. In fact, the existence of the American free press was predicated on enormous public subsidies. For the U.S. media’s first three generations, government postal subsidies, printing subsidies, and monopoly licenses were used to build the media. Just getting this basic fact into the public discussion, revealing the truth about the history of the U.S. media, is an important starting point. Much of the Left has been incapable of dealing with the crisis because it has accepted the argument that journalism is a function of private interests; if private interests can’t generate journalism, then you just don’t have it. That is the mainstream argument as well. Both arguments are wrong. We have to appreciate that the U.S. media system is based on subsidies, monopoly power and the government playing a large role. Government policy, however, have been made to serve corporate interests. Subsidies have gone mostly to corporations to serve monopolistic interests. Until people understand the relationship between the state and the media, it will seem like there is no political solution to the current problem. Everyone will write their own personal obituary for journalism because the media owners have decided they can’t make money selling newspapers. But we can do something about it. We can seize the policy-making process to democratize and develop a vibrant journalism. We need quality journalism if we want to govern our own lives.

The last thing we want to do, however, is rebuild the old media system. We are moving ahead toward a new kind of journalism. We are struggling for a journalism that incorporates the new media technologies so as to greatly democratize, open up, and make more accountable, the public information system. We want to democratize the media system so that people without property can play a much larger role in the media and in political life. The result of such democratization will, in my view, be a marked shift to the political Left. I might be wrong. Maybe the great majority of the people will decide they want 1% or 2% of the population to own everything. But in a fair debate, I don’t think that would happen.

TM: Me neither. But the proposal for new democratic media policies is attacked by neoliberal pundits, who often argue: “if you allow the state to save journalism, you will have totalitarianism!,” “State interventionism in the media is undemocratic!”, “Press freedom will be threatened.” What is your response to these kinds of statements, echoed by the mainstream media?

RM: If you look at the actual history of the relationship between the U.S. state and the U.S. media, you are faced with the question: was Thomas Jefferson the first Stalin? Was James Madison a Hitler? No, the “founding fathers” self-consciously established enlightened media subsidies to develop the media system, not to censor freedom of speech. These guys’ subsidies were content neutral. Postal subsidies were implemented to make mailing a newspaper virtually free. This applied to every newspaper, regardless of the political content. This is the kind of subsidy we are talking about. We are not intent on giving some elite in government the power to go into a newsroom and tell the publisher what to do and what not to do.

That being said, we are challenging the belief that all journalism in society should be a private enterprise. Many say that corporate journalism, based on profit maximization, best serves a free and democratic society. The position is incorrect. The connection of capitalism to journalism, which has always been fraught with problems, has always been unstable. The relationship between capitalism, journalism, and democracy has never been a sure thing. In the U.S, the notion that capitalism is the natural steward of journalism and should be left alone to provide for a free and self-governing society refers to a period that began during the 19th century. This period ended when owners realized they could make a lot of money by turning journalism into big business. Corporations are not in a position to generate and pay for quality journalism. The news is not a commercial product. It is a public good, necessary for a self-governing society. Once we accept this, we can talk about the kind of media policies and subsidies we want. What are the best ones? How should they be implemented? We are now trying to answer those questions and organize around them. If we don’t do anything, if we just sit back and hope that some new technology will magically solve the problems, or that George Soros or some billionaire philanthropist will just bankroll everything, we are dreaming. The future of journalism is an issue of the highest magnitude.

THE NEW MEDIA, THE BLOGOSPHERE AND CITIZEN-JOURNALISM

TM: Some new media libertarians argue that we may not need to reform the mainstream capitalist media, nor do we necessarily need to develop policies to save traditional journalism from disappearing. Why? Anyone, so long as they possess adequate media literacy skills, new technology and leisure-time, are using the new media tools (digital cameras, camcorders, computer software, internet, websites, Youtube, Googlevideo, etc.) to independently produce an abundance of media content and participate in politics. What are your thoughts on popular (and populist) arguments about the democratizing potential of the new media?

RM: There is a lot of truth to it. It corresponds to the reality of people’s experiences. The new media has dramatically changed the nature of all communication in society, not just journalism. No longer do the vast majority of people have to be merely recipients, on the receiving end, of information produced and transmitted by a very small number of opinion makers. The problem with the argument that people’s use of new media technologies,

personalized blogs and YouTube posts will solve the crisis faced by journalism is that it makes it seem as though we don’t have to worry about the end of journalism as we know it. The fact is that journalism is not just done by volunteers, during their spare-time. Will blogging and YouTube produce anything near satisfactory journalism? I really want to know where the trillions of dollars that the U.S. Government is giving to the financial sector are going. I want to know exactly how those deals between politicians and financial elite were made. I want a thousand I.F. Stones, combing Washington and Wall Street, investigating power.

TM: Can a blogger do this?

RM: To do this well, they would need a decent salary, professional training, and a newsroom to protect them from the powerful. They would need much more time. If I work at an office or a factory all day, go home, feed my kids and make their lunch for the next day, clean the house and do the laundry, and then sit down to blog at 11pm, it is going to suck. What people can do, though, let’s say if they’ve studied some economics and become really interested in economic issues, is this. They can actively search for, collect and read numerous pieces by journalists on the economy. They can compare different points of view, fact-check, and scrutinize sources. Then they can blog on all of this. They can actively participate in the media debate. But this does not mean trained journalists are no longer important. I view the blogosphere (the part-time or volunteer citizen-journalist) as a number of musicians improvising on a melody written by journalists. Bloggers may contribute to the melody in interesting ways. But without journalism, there is just a lot of noise. Journalism should be there to make sure that blogging is not just a lot of noise, but a beautiful song.

MEDIA POLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE TO CHALLENGE OFFICIAL SOURCES

TM: You’ve talked about how the economic organization of the media limits the autonomy of journalists. It seems that political pressures outside of the media threaten the autonomy of journalists as well. Many journalists have become integral parts of the state and private sector’s public-opinion and image-making machine. They are regularly fed information from a number of contracted spin agencies and think-tanks to participate in the manufacture of consent.

RM: Yes, the problem is this: professional journalists rely on people in power as legitimate or official sources of information. Their reliance on official sources, in turn, allows people in power set the legitimate range of debate, frame issues in certain ways, and try to determine what can and should be written about by journalists. The reliance of journalists on official sources is antithetical to what real journalism ought to be. The greatest 20th century American journalist is probably I.F. Stone, who worked in the media for almost five decades. Stone is currently celebrated by professional American journalism schools as a great hero. But for most of his life, Stone was an anathema to those that relied on official sources. Stone refused to have any relationship with people in power because he knew that relationship would corrupt his

ability to be a real journalist. He knew that this would limit his capacity to get at the truth of what the government does and whose interests it serves.



What passes for professional journalism today is opposite to the precedent set by I.F. Stone. Professional journalism is now about currying close relations to the powerful so you have access to their news. When the powerful are entirely in agreement on an issue, for example, whether or not the U.S. has the right to invade another country (taken as a given by many people in power), the journalists don't ask questions. They reproduce the elite consensus, take it as a given. In fact, if a journalist were to question the right of the U.S. to invade a country, they would be regarded by the professional news community as un-professional. They would be seen as someone who was bringing their ideological agenda or axe to grind to the discussion. When a journalist dares to question the motives of those in power, they are framed as bringing their own personal political bias into news reporting. But when a journalist just reports and repeats what people in power say and doesn't try to weigh in with critical observations, they are regarded as professional, "fair and balanced."

TM: So, U.S. media audiences take for granted the necessary separation of the state from the media system. But then they go on to question or see as ideologically "biased" a journalist's critical questioning of state power? This is a fascinating and contradictory position. How do we begin to explain it?

RM: The contradiction is built right into the capitalist control of the media. Monopoly control is one of the factors that led to the decline of quality journalism. If you have a bunch of journalists that never go after people in power, that cheerlead foreign wars whose justifications are proven to be completely false, and that promote an economy that is in deep crisis, audiences tend to tune out. It is logical and rationale for people over time to say I don't really need to know this crap. I've got to make my way through life and the media is not helping.

TM: Is this because the corporate media does not and cannot reflect the everyday concerns of working people?

RM: Well, when the media does deal with issues that people care most about – war and peace, the economy, the environment – it is made to seem like these issues are wrong or just bullshit. We need new structures capable of sustaining a vibrant new media sector that is diverse and de-centralized. We want a massive non-profit sector that is diverse and which has the resources to do journalism which engages us as citizens so that we can actually participate in our society. That is really what the battle for journalism is about. This is a central fight for anyone who is concerned with democracy (or who hates democracy). The interests of the Left are identical with those of democracy. If we had a better media system, our ideas would win.

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST HYPER-COMMERCIALISM AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

RM: The final issue that we have to deal with (and everywhere in the world has to deal with) is what I call *hyper-commercialism*. This is the conversion of every space and moment of time in our lives to selling something, promoting something, branding something. This is a huge problem in the U.S. As I travel abroad, I see hyper-commercialism all over the world. As the Internet is increasingly hyper-commercialized, we open our entire lives to 24/7 injections of advertising messages. We need to organize against hyper-commercialism. This is an easy-sell for the Left. We understand that advertising is not something done by all people equally, but rather, done by a very small group of people working on behalf of multinational corporations. Advertising is commercial propaganda; or, as the great critic James Rorty put it in the 1930s: "advertising is our master's voice." Advertising is the voice of capital. We need to do whatever we can to limit capitalist propaganda, regulate it, minimize it, and perhaps even eliminate it. The fight against hyper-commercialism becomes especially pronounced in the era of digital communications.

TM: How so?

RM: Corporate surveillance is widespread throughout the media networks in society. Software has developed to the point where corporations can now take the personal information we input into the Internet and from what we watch on TV and personalize ads to us. They monitor us and then insert personalized ads into the online webpages we visit and the content of the TV programs we watch. Extraordinary digital wiretapping practices are emerging.

TM: Yes, but this creeping Internet surveillance is promoted by the corporations doing it as beneficial to consumers, even benevolent. Its proponents say that it makes for a more efficient and interactive relationship between producers and consumers, that it is "democratizing the marketplace." "Now that companies know our individual tastes and preferences, they can customize ads on our behalf and make our consumption of goods more con-

venient!” What is your critical response to this mainstream justification for surveillance?

RM: The media corporations are lining up world-class public relations bullshit. But the public relations bullshit obscures how new media surveillance practices lead to the elimination of personal privacy. You will have no privacy whatsoever if this continues to move ahead, unchallenged. This is an outrage. It is George Orwell’s 1984 Big Brother on steroids. Corporations would like to know literally every website you go to, every icon click you make, what TV shows you watch, what commercials you skip. They want to collect, package, and sell this information, and then use it against you to try to make you spend more money. They can dress this up however they want. We need to organize to fight this and I am looking forward to it. And I think we will win this fight. But this doesn’t stop the fact that everywhere you go in our culture it is still hyper-commercialized. There is a fundamental crisis when you are in a world that is entirely commercial, in terms of the integrity of speech and thought. We are at the tipping point and we need to struggle directly against it.

TM: The world economic crisis presents us with an opportunity to do so.

OUR CRITICAL JUNCTURE: THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND GLOBAL MEDIA DEMOCRACY STRUGGLES

RM: We are at a critical juncture in the history of communication. The world economic crisis is accentuating that critical

juncture because it impacts all of society. The capitalist economy dominated by corporations has failed. The entire world is struggling to come up with something that is sustainable and humane and allows for human happiness and democracy. Issues, proposals, and solutions to the problems of the media and the world that would have seemed outrageous just a few years ago, may seem common-sense in five or ten years. This is the type of critical juncture we are in. These critical junctures only come along once or twice a century and we are in one now. But I don’t want to romanticize the present. If we don’t do it right, the alternative is going to be a nightmare. We have our work cut out for us here.

TM: We have our work cut out for us in Canada too. Canada’s media monopoly is in crisis; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is repeatedly attacked by the neoconservative Harper administration; Canada’s New Right is waging an American-style culture war against the Left. How might we move from the level of particular national struggles for media democracy toward a broader coordinated struggle for global media democracy?

RM: I don’t have a specific proposal, but what I can say with certainty is that every country is dealing basically with the same fundamental issues, but as they are shaped by specific local conditions. The response to my work on the U.S. media has been as strong from people living in countries all over the world as it has been from people in the U.S. The media is a fundamental issue of our time and that is why we struggle around and through it. It is about human beings everywhere developing the capacities to control their own destinies. **R**

Notes continued from page 24

⁹ Christopher Martin, “Detroit’s Problem: It’s Health Care, not the Union,” CommonDreams.org, December 13, 2008, www.socialistproject.ca/bullet172.html.

¹⁰ It is important to keep in mind that the transplants are not the same as imports. Even though they tend to source much less of their parts locally, they produce domestically. Toyota alone has thirteen installations in North America, in states far from the Detroit area. Inside the NAFTA area, the Detroit Three only produced half of the total manufactured in 2007. See Jean-Claude Vessilier, “Cars, the End of the Cycle,” *International Viewpoint*, March 2009.

¹¹ Harry Katz, “The Future of the UAW and the Big Three Auto Companies,” webcast from Cornell University School of ILR, February 27, 2009, www.ilr.cornell.edu/events/02270_Future-of-UAW-Webcast.html.

¹² “The Big Chill: The Car Industry,” *The Economist*, Jan. 17, 2009.

¹³ Haig Stoddard, auto analyst at HIS Global Insight, quoted in Liam Denning, “Heard on the Street: Detroit is Facing a New Normality,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2009.

¹⁴ Many will argue that the following approaches and demands are unrealistic and unrealizable. In the current context, only structural reforms, inspired by a socialist perspective can begin to address the underlying problems laid bare in the current crisis. While they are impossible to realize without a movement fighting for their implementation, raising them is part of the necessary effort to build such a movement.

¹⁵ La Botz, “What’s to Be Done about the Auto Industry?” See also *Labour Notes*, April 2009 Issue, pages 7-10, which argue the necessity and feasibility of nationalization. See also, “Restructure the Big 3 But Not with Bankruptcy,” by Mark Brenner, Mischa Gaus, and Jane Slaughter, *MRZine*, March 31, 2009, mrzine.monthlyreview.org/bgs310309.html.