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Edited by Russ Kick

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THE NEWS MEDIA AND OTHER MANIPULATORS

What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream

Noam Chomsky

From a talk at Z Media Institute, June 1997.

Part of the reason I write about the media is that I am interested in the whole intellectual culture, and the part of it that is easiest to study is the media.

It comes out every day. You can do a systematic investigation. You can compare yesterday's version to today's version. There is a lot of evidence about what's played up and what isn't and the way things are structured.

My impression is that the media aren't very different from scholarship or from, say, journals of intellectual opinion. There are some extra constraints, but it's not radically different. They interact, which is why people go up and back quite easily among them.

If you want to understand the media, or any other institution, you begin by asking questions about the internal institutional structure. And you ask about their setting in the broader society. How do they relate to other systems of power and authority? If you're lucky, there is an internal record from leading people that tells you what they are up to. That doesn't mean the public relations handouts, but what they say to each other about what they are up to. There is quite a lot of interesting documentation.

Those are major sources of information about the nature of the media. You want to study them the way, say, a scientist would study some complex molecule. You take a look at the structure and then make some hypothesis based on the structure as to what the media product is likely to look like. Then you investigate the media product and see how well it conforms to the hypotheses.

Virtually all work in media analysis is this last part—trying to study carefully just what the media product is and whether it conforms to obvious assumptions about the nature and structure of the media.

Well, what do you find? First of all, you find that there are different media which do different things. For example, entertainment/Hollywood, soap operas, and so on, or even most of the newspapers in the country (the overwhelming majority of them) are directed to a mass audience, not to inform them but to divert them.

There is another sector of the media, the elite media, sometimes called the agenda-setting media because they are the ones with

the big resources; they set the framework in which everyone else operates. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and a few others. Their audience is mostly privileged people.

The people who read the *New York Times* are mostly wealthy or part of what is sometimes called the political class. Many are actually involved in the systems of decision-making and control in an ongoing fashion, basically as managers of one sort or another. They can be political managers, business managers (like corporate executives and the like), doctrinal managers (like many people in the schools and universities), or other journalists who are involved in organizing the way people think and look at things.

The elite media set a framework within which others operate. For some years I used to monitor the Associated Press. It grinds out a constant flow of news. In the mid-afternoon there was a break every

The real mass media are basically trying to divert people.

day with a "Notice to Editors: Tomorrow's *New York Times* is going to have the following stories on the front page." The point of that is, if you're an editor of a newspaper in Dayton, Ohio, and you don't have the resources to figure out what the news is, or you don't want to think about it anyway, this tells you what the news is. These are the stories for the quarter-page that you are going to devote to something other than local affairs or diverting your audience. These are the stories that you put there because that's what the *New York Times* tells us is what you're supposed to care about tomorrow. If you are an editor of a local newspaper you pretty much have to do that, because you don't have much else in the way of resources. If you get out of line and produce stories that the elite press doesn't like, you're likely to hear about it pretty soon. What happened recently at *San Jose Mercury News* (i.e. Gary Webb's "Dark Alliance" series about CIA complicity in the drug trade) is a dramatic example of this. So there are a lot of ways in which power plays can drive you right back into line if you move out. If you try to break the mold, you're not going to last long. That framework works pretty well, and it is understandable that it is a reflection of obvious power structures.

The real mass media are basically trying to divert people. "Let them do something else, but don't bother us (us being the people who run

the show). Let them get interested in professional sports, for example. Let everybody be crazed about professional sports or sex scandals or the personalities and their problems or something like that. Anything, as long as it isn't serious. Of course, the serious stuff is for the big guys. 'We' take care of that."

There are all sorts of filtering devices to get rid of people who are a pain in the neck and think independently.

What are the elite media, the agenda-setting ones? The *New York Times* and CBS, for example. Well, first of all, they are major, very profitable, corporations.

Furthermore, most of them are either linked to, or outright owned by, much bigger corporations, like General Electric, Westinghouse, and so on. They are way up at the top of the power structure of the private economy, which is a tyrannical structure. Corporations are basically tyrannies, hierarchic, controlled from above. If you don't like what they are doing, you get out. The major media are part of that system.

What about their institutional setting? Well, that's more or less the same. What they interact with and relate to is other major power centers: the government, other corporations, the universities. Because the media function in significant ways as a doctrinal system, they interact closely with the universities. Say you are a reporter writing a story on Southeast Asia or Africa, or something like that. You're supposed to go over to the university next door and find an expert who will tell you what to write, or else go to one of the foundations, like Brookings Institute or American Enterprise Institute. They will give you the preferred version of what is happening. These outside institutions are very similar to the media.

The universities, for example, are not independent institutions. There are independent people scattered around in them (and the sciences in particular couldn't survive otherwise), but that is true of the media as well. And it's generally true of corporations. It's even true of fascist states, for that matter, to a certain extent. But the institution itself is parasitic. It's dependent on outside sources of support, and those sources of support, such as private wealth, big corporations with grants, and the government (which is so closely interlinked with corporate power that you can barely distinguish them)—they are essentially the system that the universities are in the middle of.

People within them, who don't adjust to that structure, who don't accept it and internalize it (you can't really work

with it unless you internalize it, and believe it)—people who don't do that are likely to be weeded out along the way, starting from kindergarten, all the way up. There are all sorts of filtering devices to get rid of people who are a pain in the neck and think independently.

Those of you who have been through college know that the educational system is highly geared to rewarding conformity and obedience; if you don't do that, you are a troublemaker. So, it is kind of a filtering device which ends up with people who really, honestly (they aren't lying) internalize the framework of belief and attitudes of the surrounding power system in the society. The elite institutions like, say, Harvard and Princeton and the small upscale colleges, for example, are very much geared to socialization. If you go through a place like Harvard, a good deal of what goes on is a kind of socialization: teaching how to behave like a member of the upper classes, how to think the right thoughts, and so on.

I'm sure you've read George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which he wrote in the mid-1940s. It was a satire on the Soviet Union, a totalitarian state. It was a big hit. Everybody loved it. Turns out he wrote an introduction to *Animal Farm* which wasn't published. It only appeared 30 years later. Someone found it in his papers. The introduction to *Animal Farm* was about "Literary Censorship in England," and what

it says is that obviously this book is ridiculing the Soviet Union and its totalitarian structure, but free England is not all that different. We don't have the KGB on our neck, but the end

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result comes out pretty much the same. People who have independent ideas or who think the wrong kind of thoughts are cut out.

He talks a little, only two sentences, about the institutional structure. He asks, why does this happen? Well, one, because the press is owned by wealthy men who only want certain things to reach the public. His second observation is that when you go through the elite education system, when you go through the proper schools (Oxford, and so on), you learn that there are certain things it's not proper to say and there are certain thoughts that are not proper to have. That is the socialization role of elite institutions, and if you don't adapt to that, you're usually out. Those two sentences more or less tell the story.

When you critique the media and you say, look, here is what Anthony Lewis or somebody else is writing, and you show that it happens to be distorted in a way that is highly supportive of power systems, they get very angry. They say, quite correctly, "Nobody

The press is owned by wealthy men who only want certain things to reach the public.

ever tells me what to write. I write anything I like. All this business about pressures and constraints is nonsense because I'm never under any pressure." Which is completely true, but the point is that they wouldn't be there unless they had already demonstrated that nobody has to tell them what to write because they are going to keep to the rules. If they had started off at the Metro desk and had pursued the wrong kind of stories, they never would have made it to the positions where they can now say anything they like.

The same is largely true of university faculty in the more ideological disciplines. They have been through the socialization system. Okay, you look at the structure of that whole system. What do you expect the news to be like? Well, it's not very obscure. Take the *New York Times*. It's a corporation and sells a product. The product is audiences. They don't make money when you buy the newspaper. They are happy to put it on the World Wide Web for free. They actually lose money when you buy the newspaper. The audience is the product. For the elite media, the product is privileged people, just like the people who are writing the newspapers, high-level decision-making people in society. Like other businesses, they sell their product to a market, and the market is, of course, advertisers (that is, other businesses). Whether it is television or newspapers, or whatever else, they are selling audiences. Corporations sell audiences to other corporations. In the case of the elite media, it's big businesses.

Well, what do you expect to happen? What would you predict about the nature of the media product, given that set of circumstances? What would be the null hypothesis, the kind of conjecture that you'd make assuming nothing further?

The obvious assumption is that the product of the media, what appears, what doesn't appear, the way it is slanted, will reflect the interest of the buyers and sellers, the institutions, and the power systems that are around them. If that wouldn't happen, it would be kind of a miracle.

Okay, then comes the hard work. You ask, does it work the way you predict?

Well, you can judge for yourselves. There's lots of material on this obvious hypothesis, which has been subjected to the hardest tests anybody can think of, and still stands up remarkably well. You virtually never find anything in the social sciences that so strongly supports any conclusion, which is not a big surprise, because it would be miraculous if it didn't hold up given the way the forces are operating.

The next thing you discover is that this whole topic is completely taboo. If you go to the media department at the Kennedy School of Government or Stanford, or somewhere else, and you study journalism and communications or academic political science, and so on, these questions are not likely to appear. That is, the hypothesis that anyone would come across without even knowing anything that is scarcely expressed, and the evidence bearing on it, scarcely dis-

cussed. There are some exceptions, as usual in a complex and somewhat chaotic world, but it is rather generally true. Well, you predict that, too.

If you look at the institutional structure, you would say, yeah, sure, that's likely to happen because why should these guys want to be exposed? Why should they allow critical analysis of what they are up to? The answer is, there is no reason why they should allow that and, in fact, they don't.

Again, it is not purposeful censorship. It is just that you don't make it to those positions if you haven't internalized the values and doctrines. That includes what is called "the left" as well as the right. In fact, in mainstream discussion the *New York Times* has been called "the establishment left." You're unlikely to make it through to the top unless you have been adequately socialized and trained so that there are some thoughts you just don't have, because if you did have them, you wouldn't be there. So you have a second order of prediction which is that the first order of prediction is not allowed into the discussion—again, with a scattering of exceptions, important ones.

The last thing to look at is the doctrinal framework in which this proceeds. Do people at high levels in the information system, including the media and advertising and academic political science and so on, do these people have a picture of what ought to happen when they are writing for each other, not when they are making graduation speeches? When you make a commencement speech, it's pretty words and stuff. But when they are writing for one another, what do these people say?

There are several categories to look at. One is the public relations industry, you know, the main business propaganda industry. So what are the leaders of the PR industry saying internally? Second place to look is at what are called public intellectuals, big thinkers, people who write the op-eds and that sort of thing. The people who write impressive books about the nature of democracy and that sort of business. What do they say? The third place to look is the academic sector, particularly that part that has been concerned with communications and information, much of which has been a branch of political science for many years.

So, look at these categories and see what leading figures write about these matters. The basic line (I'm partly quoting) is that the general population are "ignorant and meddling outsiders." We have to keep them out of the public arena because they are too stupid, and if they get involved they will just make trouble. Their job is to be "spectators," not "participants." They are allowed to vote every once in a while, pick out one of us smart guys. But then they are supposed to go home and do something else like watch football or whatever it may be. But the "ignorant and meddling outsiders" have to be observers, not participants. The participants are what are called the "responsible men" and, of course, the writer is always one of them. You never ask the question, why am I a "responsible man"

and somebody else, say Eugene Debs, is in jail? The answer is pretty obvious. It's because you are obedient and subordinate to power and that other person may be independent, and so on.

But you don't ask, of course. So there are the smart guys who are supposed to run the show and the rest of them are supposed to be out, and we should not succumb to (I'm quoting from an academic article) "democratic dogmatism about men being the best judges of their own interest." They are not. They are terrible judges of their own interests so we have to do it for them for their own benefit.

Actually, it is very similar to Leninism. We do things for you, and we are doing it in the interest of everyone, and so on. I suspect that's part of the reason why it's been so easy historically for people to shift up and back from being sort of enthusiastic Stalinists to being big supporters of US power. People switch very quickly from one position to the other, and my suspicion is that it's because basically it is the same position. You're not making much of a switch. You're just making a different estimate of where power lies. One point you think it's here, another point you think it's there. You take the same position.

The first World War was the first time that highly organized state propaganda institutions were developed.

How did all this evolve? It has an interesting history. A lot of it comes out of the first World War, which is a big turning point. It changed the position of the United States in the world considerably. In the eighteenth century the US was already the richest place in the world. The quality of life, health, and longevity was not achieved by the upper classes in Britain until the early twentieth century, let alone anybody else in the world. The US was extraordinarily wealthy, with huge advantages, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, it had by far the biggest economy in the world. But it was not a big player on the world scene. US power extended to the Caribbean Islands, parts of the Pacific, but not much farther.

During the first World War, the relations changed. And they changed more dramatically during the second World War. After the second World War the US more or less took over the world. But after the first World War there was already a change, and the US shifted from being a debtor to a creditor nation. It wasn't a huge actor in the international arena, like Britain, but it became a substantial force in the world for the first time. That was one change, but there were other changes.

The first World War was the first time that highly organized state propaganda institutions were developed. The British had a Ministry of Information, and they really needed it because they had to get the US into the war or else they were in bad trouble. The Ministry of Information was mainly geared to sending propaganda, including fabrications about "Hun" atrocities, and so on. They were targeting American intellectuals on the reasonable assumption that these are

the people who are most gullible and most likely to believe propaganda. They are also the ones that disseminate it through their own system. So it was mostly geared to American intellectuals, and it worked very well. The British Ministry of Information documents (a lot have been released) show their goal was, as they put it, to control the thought of the entire world—which was a minor goal—but mainly the US. They didn't care much what people thought in India. This Ministry of Information was extremely successful in deluding leading American intellectuals, and was very proud of that. Properly so, it saved their lives. They would probably have lost the first World War otherwise.

In the US there was a counterpart. Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1916 on an anti-war platform. The US was a very pacifist country. It has always been. People don't want to go fight foreign wars. The country was very much opposed to the first World War, and Wilson was, in fact, elected on an anti-war position. "Peace without victory" was the slogan. But he decided to go to war. So the question was, how do you get a pacifist population to become raving anti-German lunatics so they want to go kill all the Germans? That requires propaganda. So they set up the first and really only major state propaganda agency in US history. The Committee on Public Information, it was called (nice Orwellian title); it was also called the Creel Commission. The guy who ran it was named Creel.

The task of this commission was to propagandize the population into jingoist hysteria. It worked incredibly well. Within a few months the US was able to go to war.

A lot of people were impressed by these achievements. One person impressed, and this had some implications for the future, was Hitler. He concluded, with some justification, that Germany lost the first World War because it lost the propaganda battle. They could not begin to compete with British and American propaganda, which absolutely overwhelmed them. He pledged that next time around they'll have their own propaganda system, which they did during the second World War.

More important for us, the American business community was also very impressed with the propaganda effort. They had a problem at that time. The country was becoming formally more democratic. A lot more people were able to vote and that sort of thing. The country was becoming wealthier and more people could participate and a lot of new immigrants were coming in, and so on. So what do you do? It's going to be harder to run things as a private club.

Therefore, obviously, you have to control what people think. There had been public relations specialists, but there was never a public relations industry. There was a guy hired to make Rockefeller's image look prettier and that sort of thing. But the huge public relations industry, which is a US invention and a monstrous industry, came out of the first World War. The leading figures were people in

the Creel Commission. In fact, the main one, Edward Bernays, comes right out of the Creel Commission. He has a book that came out a few years afterwards called *Propaganda*, which became kind of a manual for the rising Public Relations industry, in which he was a prominent figure. The term “propaganda,” incidentally, did not have negative connotations in those days.

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It was during the second World War that the term became taboo because it was connected with Germany and all those bad things. But in this period, the term “propaganda” just meant information or something like that.

So he wrote a book called *Propaganda* in the late 1920s. He explains that he is applying the lessons of the first World War. The propaganda system of the first World War and this commission that he was part of showed, he says, that it is possible to “regiment the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments their bodies.” These new techniques of regimentation of minds, he said, had to be used by the “intelligent minorities” in order to make sure that the slob stay on the right course. We can do it now because we have these new techniques.

This was an important manual of the public relations industry. Bernays was a kind of guru. He was an authentic Roosevelt/Kennedy liberal. He also engineered the public relations effort behind the US-backed coup which overthrew the democratic government of Guatemala.

His major coup, the one that really propelled him into fame in the late 1920s, was getting women to smoke. Women didn’t smoke in those days, and he ran huge campaigns for Chesterfield. You know all the techniques—models and movie stars with cigarettes coming out of their mouths, symbolizing the free, liberated modern woman. He got enormous praise for that. So he became a leading figure of the industry, and his book was an important manual.

Another member of the Creel Commission was Walter Lippmann, the most respected figure in American journalism for about half a century (I mean serious American journalism, serious think pieces). He also wrote what are called progressive essays on democracy, regarded as progressive back in the 1920s. He was, again, applying the lessons of propaganda very explicitly. He says there is a new art in democracy called “manufacture of consent.” That is his phrase. Edward Herman and I borrowed it for our book, but it comes from Lippmann. So, he says, there is this new art in the practice of democracy, “manufacture of consent.” By manufacturing consent, you can overcome the fact that formally a lot of people

have the right to vote. We can make it irrelevant because we can manufacture consent and make sure that their choices and attitudes will be structured in such a way that they will do what we tell them, even if they have a formal way to participate. So we’ll have a real democracy. It will work properly. That’s applying the lessons of the propaganda agency.

Academic social science and political science come out of the same

kind of thinking. One of the founders of the field of communications in academic political science is Harold Lasswell. One of his first achievements was a study of propaganda. Writing in an *Encyclopedia of Social Science* he says, very frankly, the things I was quoting before about not succumbing to “democratic dogmatism.” That comes from academic political science (Lasswell and others).

Again, drawing the lessons from the war-time experience, political parties drew the same lessons, especially the conservative party in England. Their documents from the period, just being released, show they also recognized the achievements of the British Ministry of Information. They recognized that the country was getting more democratized and it wouldn’t be a private men’s club. So the conclusion was, as they put it, politics has to become political warfare, applying the mechanisms of propaganda that worked so brilliantly during the first World War towards controlling people’s thoughts. That’s the doctrinal side, and it coincides with the institutional structure.

It strengthens the predictions about the way the thing should work. And the predictions are well confirmed. But these conclusions, also, are not supposed to be discussed. This is all now part of mainstream literature, but it is only for people on the inside. When you go to college, you don’t read the classics about how to control people’s minds.

Just like you don’t read what James Madison said during the constitutional convention about how the main goal of the new system has to be “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” and has to be designed so that it achieves that end. This is the founding of the constitutional system, but it is scarcely studied. You can’t even find it in the academic scholarship unless you look hard.

That is roughly the picture, as I see it, of the way the system is institutionally, the doctrines that lie behind it, the way it comes out. There is another part directed to the “ignorant and meddling outsiders.” That is mainly using diversion of one kind or another. From that, I think, you can predict what you would expect to find.

When you go to college, you don’t read the classics about how to control people’s minds.

Journalists Doing Somersaults

Self-Censorship and the Rise of the Corporate Media State

Norman Solomon

Coverage of Media Mergers: A Window into the Future of Journalism

Four months after the stunning news about plans to combine Viacom and CBS, the year 2000 began with the announcement of an even more spectacular merger—America Online and Time Warner. Faced with these giant steps toward extreme concentration of media power, journalists mostly responded with acquiescence.

Now, as one huge media merger follows another, the benefits for owners and investors are evident. But for our society as a whole, the consequences seem ominous. The same limits that have constrained the media's coverage of recent mergers within its own ranks are becoming features of this new mass-media landscape. For the public, nothing less than democratic discourse hangs in the balance.

"Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one," A.J. Liebling remarked several decades ago. In 2000, half-a-dozen corporations owned the media outlets that control most of the news and information flow in the United States. The accelerating mergers are terrific for the profits of those with the deepest pockets, but bad for journalism and bad for democracy.



When the Viacom-CBS story broke, media coverage depicted a match made in corporate heaven: At more than \$37 billion, it was the largest media merger in history. With potential effects on the broader public kept outside the story's frame, what emerged was a rosy picture. "Analysts hailed the deal as a good fit between two complementary companies," the Associated Press reported flatly. The news service went on to quote a media analyst who proclaimed: "It's a good deal for everybody."

Everybody? Well, everybody who counts in the mass-media calculus. For instance, the media analyst quoted by AP was from the PaineWebber investment firm. "You need to be big," Christopher Dixon explained. "You need to have a global presence." Dixon showed up again the next morning in the lead article of the September 8, 1999, edition of the *New York Times*, along with other high-finance strategists. An ana-

lyst at Merrill Lynch agreed with his upbeat view of the Viacom-CBS combination. So did an expert from ING Barings: "You can literally pick an advertiser's needs and market that advertiser across all the demographic profiles, from Nickelodeon with the youngest consumers to CBS with some of the oldest consumers."

In sync with the prevalent media spin, the *New York Times* devoted plenty of ink to assessing advertiser needs and demographic profiles. But during the crucial first day of the *Times*' coverage, foes of the Viacom-CBS consolidation did not get a word in edgewise. There was, however, an unintended satire of corporate journalism when a writer referred to the bygone era of the 1970s: "In those quaint days, it bothered people when companies owned too many media properties."

The *Washington Post*, meanwhile, ran a front-page story that provided similar treatment of the latest and greatest media merger, pausing just long enough for a short dissonant note from media critic Mark Crispin Miller: "The implications of these mergers for journalism and the arts are enormous. It seems to me that this is, by any definition, an undemocratic development. The media system in a democracy should not be inordinately dominated by a few very powerful interests." It wasn't an idea that the *Post*'s journalists pursued.

Overall, the big media outlets—getting bigger all the time—offer narrow and cheery perspectives on the significance of merger mania. News accounts keep the focus on market share preoccupations of investors and top managers. Numerous stories explore the widening vistas of cross-promotional synergy for the shrewdest media titans. While countless reporters are determined to probe how each company stands to gain from the latest deal, few of them demonstrate much enthusiasm for exploring what is at stake for the public. With rare exceptions, news outlets covered the Viacom-CBS merger as a business story. But more than anything else, it should have been covered, at least in part, as a story with dire implications for possibilities of democratic discourse. And the same was true for the announcement that came a few months later—on January 10, 2000—when a hush seemed to fall over the profession of journalism.

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A grand new structure, AOL Time Warner, was unveiled in the midst of much talk about a wondrous New Media world to come, with cornucopias of bandwidth and market share. On January 2, just one week before the portentous announcement, the head of Time Warner had alluded to the transcendent horizons. Global media “will be and is fast becoming the predominant business of the twenty-first century,” Gerald Levin said on CNN, “and we’re in a new economic age, and what may happen, assuming that’s true, is it’s more important than government. It’s more important than educational institutions and non-profits.”

Levin went on: “So what’s going to be necessary is that we’re going to need to have these corporations redefined as instruments of public service because they have the resources, they have the reach, they have the skill base. And maybe there’s a new generation coming up that wants to achieve meaning in that context and have an impact, and that may be a more efficient way to deal with society’s problems than bureaucratic governments.” Levin’s next sentence underscored the sovereign right of capital in dictating the new direction.

“It’s going to be forced anyhow because when you have a system that is instantly available everywhere in the world immediately, then the old-fashioned regulatory system has to give way,” he said.

To discuss an imposed progression of events as some kind of natural occurrence is a convenient form of mysticism, long popular among the corporately pious, who are often eager to wear mantles of royalty and divinity. Tacit beliefs deem the accumulation of wealth to be redemptive. Inside corporate temples, monetary standards gauge worth. Powerful executives now herald joy to the world via a seamless web of media. Along the way, the rest of us are not supposed to worry much about democracy. On January 12, AOL chief Steve Case assured a national PBS television audience on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. “Nobody’s going to control anything.” Seated next to him, Levin declared: “This company is going to operate in the public interest.”

Such pledges, invariably uttered in benevolent tones, were bursts of fog while Case and Levin moved ahead to gain more billions for themselves and maximum profits for some other incredibly wealthy people. By happy coincidence, they insisted, the media course that would make them richest was the same one that held the most fulfilling promise for everyone on the planet.



Journalists accustomed to scrutinizing the public statements of powerful officials seem quite willing to hang back from challenging the claims of media magnates. Even when reporting on a rival media firm, journalists who work in glass offices hesitate to throw weighty stones; a substantive critique of corporate media priorities could easily boomerang. And when a media merger suddenly occurs, news coverage can turn deferential overnight.

On March 14, 2000—the day after the Tribune Company announced its purchase of the *Los Angeles Times* and the rest of the Times Mirror empire—the acquired newspaper reported on the fine attributes of its owner-to-be. In a news article that read much like a corporate press release, the *Times* hailed the Tribune Company as “a diversified media concern with a reputation for strong management” and touted its efficient benevolence. Tribune top managers, in the same article, “get good marks for using cost-cutting and technology improvements throughout the corporation to generate a profit margin that’s among the industry’s highest.” The story went on to say that, “Tribune is known for not using massive job cuts to generate quick profits from media properties it has bought.”

Compare that rosy narrative to another news article published the same day by the *New York Times*. Its story asserted, as a matter of

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fact, that, “The Tribune Co. has a reputation not only for being a fierce cost-cutter and union buster but for putting greater and greater emphasis on entertainment, and business.”

And so it goes. As the newspaper industry consolidates along with the rest of the media business, the writing is on the virtual wall. The Tribune Company long ago realized that its flagship newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*, and its other daily papers would need to become merely one component of a multimedia powerhouse in order to maximize growth and profits. Tribune expanded—heavily—into broadcast television, cable, radio, entertainment, and the Internet.

The key is advertising. And now Tribune can offer advertisers a dazzling array of placements in diverse media from coast to coast. Ad contracts will involve massive “penetration” via big newspapers, broadcaster stations, cable outlets, regional Websites, and online services in areas such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Baltimore. “Synergy” will rule.

Along the way, the new giant Tribune Company will become the country’s third-largest newspaper chain—publishing papers with daily circulation of 3.6 million copies—behind only Gannett and Knight Ridder. In addition to putting eleven daily papers under one corporate roof, the new conglomerate will combine the Tribune’s current ownership of 22 major TV stations with a range of Times Mirror magazines that claim more than 60 million readers.

For journalists at the *Los Angeles Times*, the signs have been dispiriting for years now. In 1995 corporate parent Times Mirror brought in a CEO, Mark Willes, who had been a whiz at General Mills. He promptly compared selling newspapers to peddling boxes of cereal.

Willes moved quickly to swing a wrecking ball at the walls between the news and advertising departments. Business execs were assigned to each section of the newspaper to collaborate with editors in shaping editorial content. The message was clear: To be fine, journalism must keep boosting the bottom line.

With such an approach it's no surprise that Times Mirror initiated the negotiations with the Tribune Company that led to the \$6.46 billion deal. The Chandler family, holding most of the Times Mirror voting shares, was eager to cash out.



"It is not necessary to construct a theory of intentional cultural control," media critic Herbert Schiller commented in 1989. "In truth, the strength of the control process rests in its apparent absence. The desired systemic result is achieved ordinarily by a loose though effective institutional process." In his book *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*, Schiller went on to cite "the education of journalists and other media professionals, built-in penalties and rewards for doing what is expected, norms presented as objective rules, and the occasional but telling direct intrusion from above. The main lever is the internalization of values."

Self-censorship has long been one of journalism's most ineffable hazards. The current wave of mergers rocking the media industry is likely to heighten the dangers. To an unprecedented extent, large numbers of American reporters and editors now work for just a few huge corporate employers, a situation that hardly encourages unconstrained scrutiny of media conglomerates as they assume unparalleled importance in public life.

The mergers also put a lot more journalists on the payrolls of mega-media institutions that are very newsworthy as major economic and social forces. But if those institutions are paying the professionals who provide the bulk of the country's news coverage, how much will the public learn about the internal dynamics and societal effects of these global entities?

Many of us grew up with tales of journalistic courage dating back to Colonial days. John Peter Zenger's ability to challenge the British Crown with unyielding articles drew strength from the fact that he was a printer and publisher. Writing in the *New York Weekly*, a periodical burned several times by the public hangman, Zenger asserted in November 1733: "The loss of liberty in general would soon follow the suppression of the liberty of the press; for it is an essential branch of liberty, so perhaps it is the best preservative of the whole."

In contrast to state censorship, which is usually easy to recognize, self-censorship by journalists tends to be obscured. It is particularly murky and insidious in the emerging media environment, with routine pressures to defer to employers that have massive industry clout and global reach. We might wonder how Zenger would fare in most of

today's media workplaces, especially if he chose to denounce as excessive the power of the conglomerate providing his paycheck.

Americans are inclined to quickly spot and automatically distrust government efforts to impose prior restraint. But what about the implicit constraints imposed by the hierarchies of enormous media corporations and internalized by employees before overt conflicts develop?

"If liberty means anything at all," George Orwell wrote, "it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear." As immense communications firms increasingly dominate our society, how practical will it be for journalists to tell their bosses—and the public—what media tycoons do not want to hear about the concentration of power in a few corporate hands? Orwell's novel *1984* describes the conditioned reflex of "stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought...and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction."

In the real world of 2000, bypassing key issues of corporate dominance is apt to be a form of obedience: in effect, self-censorship. "Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip," Orwell observed more than half a century ago, "but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip." Of course, no whips are visible in America's modern newsrooms and broadcast studios. But if Orwell were alive today, he would surely urge us to be skeptical about all the somersaults.

Break Up Microsoft?... Then How About the Media "Big Six?"

The push by federal regulators to break up Microsoft was big news. Until that point, the software giant seemed untouchable—and few people demanded effective antitrust efforts against monopoly power in the software industry. These days, a similar lack of vision is routine in looking at the media business.

"Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip," Orwell observed more than half a century ago, "but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip."

Today, just six corporations have a forceful grip on America's mass media. We should consider how to break the hammerlock that huge firms currently maintain around the windpipe of the First Amendment. And we'd better hurry.

The trend lines of media ownership are steep and ominous in the United States. When *The Media Monopoly* first appeared on bookshelves in 1983, author Ben Bagdikian explains, "Fifty corporations

dominated most of every mass medium.” With each new edition, that number kept dropping—to 29 media firms in 1987, 23 in 1990, fourteen in 1992, and ten in 1997.

Published in spring 2000, the sixth edition of *The Media Monopoly* documents that just a half-dozen corporations are now supplying most of the nation’s media fare. And Bagdikian, a long-time journalist, continues to sound the alarm. “It is the overwhelming collective power of these firms, with their corporate interlocks and unified cultural and political values, that raises troubling questions about the individual’s role in the American democracy.”

I wonder what the chances are that Bagdikian—or anyone else—will be invited onto major TV broadcast networks to discuss the need for vigorous antitrust enforcement against the biggest media conglomerates. Let’s see:

CBS. Not a good bet, especially since its merger with Viacom (one of the Big Six) was announced in the fall of 1999.

NBC. Quite unlikely. General Electric, a Big Six firm, has owned NBC since 1986.

ABC. Forget it. This network became the property of the Disney Company five years ago. Disney is now the country’s second-largest media outfit.

Fox. The Fox network is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., currently number four in the media oligarchy.

And then there’s always cable television, with several networks devoted to news:

CNN. The world’s biggest media conglomerate, Time Warner, owns CNN—where antitrust talk about undue concentration of media power is about as welcome as the Internationale sung at a baseball game in Miami.

CNBC. Sixth-ranked General Electric owns this cable channel.

MSNBC. Spawned as a joint venture of GE and Microsoft, the MSNBC network would see activism against media monopoly as double trouble.

Fox News Channel. The Fox cable programming rarely wanders far from the self-interest of News Corp. tycoon Murdoch.

Since all of those major TV news sources are owned by one of the Big Six, the chances are mighty slim that you’ll be able to catch a discussion of media antitrust issues on national television.

Disney is now the country’s second-largest media outfit.

Meanwhile, the only Big Sixer that doesn’t possess a key US television outlet—the Bertelsmann firm, based in Germany—is the most powerful company in the book industry. It owns the mammoth publisher Random House, and plenty more in the media universe. Bertelsmann “is the world’s third largest conglomerate,” Bagdikian reports, “with substantial ownership of magazines, newspapers, music, television, on-line trading, films, and radio in 53 countries.” Try pitching a book proposal to a Random House editor about the dangers of global media consolidation.

Well, you might comfort yourself by thinking about cyberspace. Think again. The dominant Internet service provider, America Online, is combining with already-number-one Time Warner—and the new firm, AOL Time Warner, would have more to lose than any other corporation if a movement grew to demand antitrust action against media conglomerates.

Amid rampant overall commercialization of the most heavily-trafficked websites, AOL steers its 22 million subscribers in many directions—and, in the future, Time Warner’s offerings will be most frequently

While seeming to be gateways to a vast cybergalaxy, AOL’s favorite links will remain overwhelmingly corporate-friendly within a virtual cul-de-sac.

highlighted. While seeming to be gateways to a vast cybergalaxy, AOL’s favorite links will remain overwhelmingly corporate-friendly within a virtual cul-de-sac.

Hype about the New Media seems boundless, while insatiable, old hungers for maximum profits fill countless screens. Centralization is the order of the media day. As Bagdikian points out: “The power and influence of the dominant companies are understated by counting them as ‘six.’ They are intertwined: they own stock in each other, they cooperate in joint media ventures, and among themselves they divide profits from some of the most widely viewed programs on television, cable and movies.”

We may not like the nation’s gigantic media firms, but right now they don’t care much what we think. A strong antitrust movement aimed at the Big Six could change such indifference in a hurry.

The Puppets of Pandemonium

Sleaze and Sloth in the Media Elite
Howard Bloom

Everything you've ever heard about pack journalism is true. In fact, it's an understatement. Though journalists pride themselves on their intellectual independence, they are neither very intellectual nor even marginally independent. They are animals. In fact, they operate on the same herd instincts that guide ants, hoofed mammals, and numerous other social creatures.

In 1827, well before the sciences of ethology and sociobiology had even been invented, historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle said that the critics of his day were like sheep. Put a stick in the path as a lead sheep goes by, wrote the sage, and the beast will jump over it. Remove the stick, and each following sheep in line will jump at precisely the same spot...even though there's no longer anything to jump over! Things haven't changed much since then. If the key critics at the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and *Rolling Stone* fall in love with a musical artist, every other critic in the country will follow their lead. On the other hand, if these lead sheep say an artist is worthless, every other woolly-minded critic from Portland to Peoria will miraculously draw the same conclusion.

When I was out on tour with ZZ Top in 1976, I remember sitting at one of the group's concerts between the critics from Minneapolis' two major dailies. At the time, I was also handling a group called Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band. The lead sheep in the press hated ZZ Top, but they loved Dr. Buzzard. So it had been fairly easy to land major features lauding the Original Savannah Band in the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice* during the same week. As I sat between Minneapolis' two finest models of journalistic integrity and independent judgment in the moments before the lights dimmed and ZZ Top hit the stage, one was reading the *New York Times*' article on Dr. Buzzard and the other was reading the *Voice*'s. Both were hungrily snorring up the latest hints on how they should feel about the music of the month.

*From the notes for The Fame Factory:
Two Thousand Years of Media Madness,
a book Howard Bloom will probably
complete sometime after the year 2010.*

Not surprisingly, when the concert ended and the duo returned to their typewriters, they cranked out copy with identical judgments. ZZ Top, whose music the *Village Voice*, in a blaring headline, had once said sounded like "hammered shit," was roundly panned, despite the fact that both critics admitted grudgingly in print that via some collective descent into tastelessness, the crowd had gone wild. Then both turned their attention to slaveringly sycophantic paeans to Dr. Buzzard, thus echoing the opinions they'd absorbed from their fashionable reading earlier in the evening.

If I sound like I despise such attitudes, it's because I do. An appalling number of the acts the press (and the publicists who fawn over journalistic dictates) dislikes have tremendous validity. I always felt it was my job to do for erring writers what Edmund Wilson, the literary critic, had done for me. When I was a teenager, I couldn't make head nor tails of T.S. Eliot. His poetry utterly baffled me. So I came to the conclusion that Eliot's work was an elaborate hoax, a pastiche of devices designed to fool the pretentious into thinking that if they admitted a failure to understand all of his erudite references, they'd make themselves look like fools.

Then along came Edmund Wilson (or at least one of his books), and gave me the perceptual key that unlocked Eliot's poetry. Now that I finally understood the stuff, I fell in love with it. What's more, I started giving public readings of Eliot's work, and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" became one of the biggest influences on my 16-year-old life.

My task as a publicist was to provide similar perceptual keys. It was to read every lyric an artist had ever written, listen to his or her album 20 or 30 times, and immerse myself in his work until I understood its merit. Then my job was to impart that understanding to a hostile press. In other words, my fellow publicists liked riding waves. I preferred the more difficult task of making them happen.

What's more, I felt my job was to act as a surrogate journalist. I studied everything that had ever been written (quite literally) about a new client in English (or sometimes French, my only other tongue), then subjected the artist to an interview that lasted anywhere from six hours to three days. My goal was to find the interesting stories, the things that would amaze, the facts that would make sense out of the music, the angles that would make for unrejectable feature stories,

My fellow publicists liked riding waves.
I preferred the more difficult task of
making them happen.

and the tales that would give some insight into the hidden emotional and biographical sources of the performer's creations.

After one of these interviews, John Cougar Mellencamp, a natural-born talker, was literally so exhausted that he couldn't croak more than a sentence or two to his wife and fell asleep in his living room chair (we'd been going since ten in the morning, and it was now four in the afternoon).

At any rate, this may explain why it was not Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band—the group with the automatic popularity—that I spent six years working on, but ZZ Top, the band the press either refused to write about altogether or put down with some variation of Robert (Village Voice) Christgau's "hammered shit" verdict. It took three years to turn the press around. Creating that about-face involved a process I used to call "perceptual engineering." ZZ Top had authenticity and validity out the kazoo. My task was to do everything in my power to reverse the direction of the herd's stampede and to make the critics see the substance they had overlooked. For the first few years, the press continued to sneer whenever the group's name came up. But gradually, I got a few lead sheep by the horns (do sheep have horns?) and turned them around. The rest of the herd followed. One result: For the next ten years, ZZ Top became one of the few bands of its genre to command genuine, unadulterated press respect.

Eventually, the group didn't need me anymore. They don't to this day. The press is now ZZ Top's best publicist. Say something nasty at a press party about this band, and those in the know will turn around and snarl, forgetting that over a decade ago they would have growled if you'd even confessed to *listening* to one of the Texas band's LPs.



Public relations taught me a good deal more about why facts were not, after all, what a good reporter wanted. He wanted a story that would either titillate his audience, fit his own clique's political prejudices, or replicate a piece of reportage he'd read somewhere else.

If you really want to have your blood curdled, ask for the tale of the day that two members of the paparazzi, using a fast car, chased Michael Jackson's van down a crowded highway, jumped a divider, raced at 60 miles an hour against traffic on a two-way highway, thus endangering lives, then jumped the divider again and spun at a ninety-degree angle, blocking the highway and nearly causing Jackson's

van to crash. The photographers exited their vehicle, cameras in hand, smugly thinking they'd cornered Jackson and would get a highly-prized photo. They did not show any identification and could easily have been nut jobs attempting to pull what was threatened in a large pile of daily mail Jackson received—an assassination.

Hence, Jackson's security guards—LAPD officers on leave—exited the van, which had been forced to a screeching halt in mid-highway. Not knowing what they were up against, one of the guards armed himself with a truck iron. Seeing this weapon, one of the photographers (this is not a joke or exaggeration) pulled a gun. Then the two hightailed it to a telephone, called their editor at the *New York Daily News*, and reported that they'd been threatened for no reason by Michael Jackson's bodyguards. The editor then prepared a front-page headline story about the violent way in which Michael Jackson's toughs had just manhandled innocent press folk. It was on its way to press.

I did some quick research (not easy on a Sunday afternoon), found out that the photographer who had waved his firearm had been arrested on two felony charges for similar behavior, got on the phone, pried the paper's publisher from a golf game, and gave him the real details of the story. It took two hours of threatening the man with the nasty facts to convince the publisher to yank the story. On normal occasions there is no one to stop a falsified tale of this nature from hitting the headline of a publication thirsting for tabloid blood.

I suspect a similar race to avoid a pack of rabid paparazzi was in full sprint the night Princess Di was killed in a car crash.



That these principles of press misconduct are regularly applied in the world of pop music doesn't really matter much. It will have hardly any effect on the fate of the world. But the same principles at work in the field of politics have wreaked havoc. In fact, they have made the media one of the most egregious collaborators in mass murder throughout the twentieth century.

While millions were being killed in the Soviet Union, Western journalists participated in the cover-up. Walter Durante of the *New York Times*, who was supplied by the People's Government with a luxurious apartment in Moscow and a good supply of caviar, said nothing about Stalin's murderous rampage. Reporting the truth might have endangered his cozy relationship with the Soviet authorities. Hundreds of other journalists visited the Soviet Union without reporting on the slaughter. Lincoln Steffens, an influential American newspaperman, said: "I have seen the future and it works." This didn't fit the facts, but it did fit Steffens' political preconceptions. Writers with

similarly idealistic beliefs tried to give the impression that while the West was decomposing, the Soviet Union was showing the way to a brave new world.

More than mere idealism was involved. Writers were determined to remain politically fashionable. They didn't want to be snubbed by their peers. After all, the bright lights of high culture were pro-Soviet. George Bernard Shaw had gone to the Soviet Union and had said it was ushering in a thousand bright tomorrows. He'd read his own dreams into this land of horror. Critic Edmund Wilson had said the death chamber of the Soviet state was "a moral sanctuary where the light never stops shining." Writers who attempted to tell the truth were viciously attacked as enemies of progressive humanitarianism. Meanwhile, shielded by a dishonest Western press, Soviet authorities killed over 25 million men, women, and children—shooting, starving, torturing, or working them to death.

Now the press is doing it again. This time in its coverage of Israel and the Arab states. Several years ago, when the offices of *Omnim* magazine were picketed by Arabs for four days because of an article I'd written,

Only one page on the Lebanese atrocities appeared in the *New York Times* during a four-year period.

I was forced to dive into Jewish issues. I discovered, to my horror, that vast areas of fact were being violently distorted by the media in a subtly anti-Semitic manner, and that no one was getting the truth out.

Take the following instance. In the early 1970s, the Palestine Liberation Organization had created so much havoc in Lebanon that Jordan's non-Palestinian Hashemite government decided to throw the PLO out.

The PLO moved its operations to southern Lebanon, where the Islamic population welcomed the Organization's members as brothers. But the PLO were not in a brotherly mood. They turned their visit into a military occupation, confiscating Lebanese homes and autos, raping Lebanese girls, and lining up groups of Lebanese who didn't acquiesce quickly enough, then machine-gunning them to death.

The PLO was even harsher to Lebanon's 2,000-year-old Christian population. Using Soviet-supplied heavy artillery, the PLO virtually leveled two Christian cities, Sidon and Tyre, and carried out massacres in smaller Christian villages. Only one page on the Lebanese atrocities appeared in the *New York Times* during a four-year period. No articles whatsoever showed up in *The Times* of London.

Why didn't the press cover any of this? You can infer some of the reasons from the comments on press behavior I mentioned above. For one thing, there's the slavish herd impulse which drives the press (see Evelyn Waugh's brilliant novel *Scoop* for a satirical view of the press at work as Waugh saw it when he was covering the

news in Ethiopia). It had become chic among media types to run away from Israel and into the arms of the Arabs. For another, there's the unerring tendency of the press to make the cause of mass murderers politically fashionable. And finally, there's the fact that the PLO had done its best to make sure it got every story covered its own way.

Yasir Arafat's kindly organization killed six Western journalists who strayed from the PLO line. Yasir's boys took an "uncooperative" Lebanese newspaper publisher captive, dismembered him one joint at a time, and sent a piece of the corpse to each of the Beirut foreign press corps with a photo of the man being tortured alive. The message was self-explanatory.

The Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), and the major American newspapers had long been frantic to maintain a foothold in Beirut. After all, Syria, Iraq, and most of the other Arab countries wouldn't let their correspondents in. Beirut was their only toehold in the Arab world. So each outlet bargained sycophantically with the PLO. They promised not to publish stories on PLO atrocities—including the military seizure of southern Lebanon. The major news organizations submitted credentials on all journalists sent to the area for PLO approval. They agreed to headquarter their reporters in a PLO-controlled hotel. And they let the PLO assign a "guide"—that is, a censor, watchdog, and feeder of misinformation—to each writer. Within a short amount of time, only PLO sympathizers were covering Middle Eastern news.

In the early 1980s, Israel sent forces into Lebanon. Every 24 hours or so, the PLO threw a conference at which it rolled out its version of the day's events. The press dutifully printed what it had been given. PLO spokesmen handed out photos of Israeli tanks rolling through the two Christian cities the PLO had leveled several years earlier with captions "explaining" that the PLO-caused damage clearly visible in the pictures had been inflicted by the Israelis. The press printed these distortions as fact.

The PLO distributed photos of a Beirut infant wrapped in bandages with a caption declaring that the baby had been burned over 75 percent of its body by Israeli shelling. Most major newspapers ran the story on page one. President Reagan was so moved that he kept the picture on his desk for days. Later, UPI was forced to issue a retraction. It turned out that the PLO press release accompanying the photos had contained several minor inaccuracies. The child had been injured not by an Israeli shell but by a PLO rocket, and 75 percent of the baby's body had not been burned; the infant had suffered a sprained ankle. The PLO had been aware of these facts before it ever wrote up its caption.

But pictures are what counts. No one registered the correction. Everyone remembered the mislabeled image.

By sifting through tens of thousands of pages of information—including ten years' worth of the *New York Times* and *The Times* of London—by digging up some very obscure books, and by working my way through a maze of little-known experts, I found that the Arab countries have a massive campaign of media and press manipulation at work in the United States. They've endowed university chairs from coast to coast to give academic credibility to their spokesmen. One result: When the Ayatollah called for the death of Salman Rushdie in 1989, the head of UCLA's Middle East studies program said he'd be happy to fire the gun himself. So the Middle East "experts" interviewed everywhere from the *Washington Post* to PBS' *Newshour* have an increasing tendency to speak up on the Arab side, defending gross distortions as gospel truths.

In addition, the Arabs pull strings in Washington through top-ranking firms like Bechtel and Aramco. Bechtel, in fact, used its military contacts to obtain top-secret US surveillance photos of Israel's bor-

Meanwhile, journalists like Hedrick Smith shout loudly about the Israeli lobby, while pretending that an Arab lobby dwarfing it in size and resources does not exist.

der deployments before the 1948 war of liberation and passed them on to the Saudis. In addition, companies like Ford, General Electric, and numerous other lobbies woo the press actively on behalf of the Arabs under the umbrella of the Arab American Chamber of Commerce.

Meanwhile, journalists like Hedrick Smith shout loudly about the Israeli lobby, while pretending that an Arab lobby dwarfing it in size and resources does not exist.

Until 1948, more Jews than Arabs lived in Baghdad, yet no reporter champions the rights of Baghdad's Jewish refugees. 800,000 Jews fled Arab countries in which their families had lived for centuries—sometimes for millennia—with only the clothing on their backs, yet the press never writes about them. And many of the Palestinian refugees the media are so concerned for are not Palestinians at all. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East was long ago pressured into defining as "Palestinian" any Arab who had lived in Palestine for a minimum of two years.

Yet the press has adopted the slogan, "Land for peace." No Arab country has offered peace. For decades, none talked seriously about stopping the boycott of Israel, which in terms of international law constituted an act of war. Few have offered to drop their official state of war against Israel. And none has ceased the rhetoric in its official newspapers calling for the annihilation of Israel, the genocidal destruction of Israel's citizens, and, in some cases, the elimination of worldwide Jewry.

Just as in the case of Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China, the media has chosen sides. And the side it likes the best is that of the mass murderers.



In 1964, while writing a position paper on the Viet Nam war for a congressional candidate in Buffalo, NY, I reviewed a tremendous percentage of the material being written on the subject at the time—everything from articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* to the speeches of the President and his leading cabinet members. I turned vehemently against our participation in the bloodbath. It wasn't until 26 years later, while reading a novel by a South Korean who'd participated in the war—an author whose moral stance was neutral and whose work was published by a house whose owners were as much against the war as I had been—that I learned the Viet Cong had regularly enforced discipline in "liberated" villages by

tying recalcitrant families—men, women, and children—to kegs of dynamite and blowing them up in the town square as a lesson to anyone else who might disagree with the new form of Viet Cong freedom. Somehow the American and French press—which I'd

also followed fairly carefully—was diligent in its reporting of American atrocities. But the atrocities of the Viet Cong were air-brushed out of existence. And my impression these days is that the Viet Cong's outrages were the worst of the two.



Print journalists have traditionally been accomplices in mass violence. Television journalists have gone a step further; they have become instigators of violence. Highly respected CBS reporter Daniel Schorr, who started his career with Edward R. Murrow and reported on everything from the Soviets and the CIA to Watergate, confesses that "most of us in television understood, but did not like to think about, the symbiotic relationship between our medium and violence.... In the mid-Nineteen Sixties, covering urban unrest for CBS, I perceived that television placed a premium on violence and the threat of violence. I found that I was more likely to get on the CBS *Evening News* with a black militant talking the language of 'Burn, baby burn!' than with moderates appealing for a Marshall Plan for the ghetto. So, I spent a lot of time interviewing militants like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rapp Brown.

"In early February 1968, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. came to Washington to announce plans for a 'poor people's march' on Washington in the Spring. It was envisaged as a challenge to America's social conscience at a time when the Vietnam war was escalating. The civil rights community was sharply divided over whether the campaign should be completely peaceful or resort to disruptive action, like unlicensed demonstrations and blocking the

bridges into the capitol. Dr. King was having trouble sustaining his policy on nonviolence. On February 6, the evening before his planned news conference, the civil rights leader expressed his despair to a rally, 'I can't lose hope, because when you lose hope, you die.' Only dimly aware of the pressures on Dr. King, I came to his news conference with a CBS camera crew prepared to do what TV reporters do—get the most threatening sound bite I could in order to insure a place on the *Evening News* lineup. I succeeded in eliciting from him phrases on the possibility of 'disruptive protest' directed at the Johnson Administration and Congress.

"As I waited for my camera crew to pack up, I noticed that Dr. King remained seated behind a table in an almost-empty room, looking depressed. Approaching him, I asked why he seemed so morose. 'Because of you,' he said, 'and because of your colleagues in television. You try to provoke me to threaten violence, and if I don't then you will put on television those who do. By putting them on television, you elect them our leaders. And, if there is violence, will you think of your part in bringing it about?' I was shaken, but not enough to keep me from excerpting the news conference film from the evening news... I never saw Dr. King again. Less than two months later, he was assassinated."¹



Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was an early pioneer of the kind of not-so-subtle moral corruption of the press that I constantly bumped my nose against during my fifteen years working with journalists. Swift came along at just the time when coffee had been introduced to London. The stuff became a rage and made men unbelievably jumpy and talkative. So they gathered to work off their energies by gossiping in a hot new form of eatery (or drinkery)—the coffeehouse. Out of the coffeehouses and the men who entered them to swap political and economic tidbits came another pair of fashionable new items—the newspaper and the magazine. (The news broadsheet had already been around for nearly 200 years, as had the pamphlet, which Christopher Columbus used to good effect after he got back from America, and which Martin Luther tossed around like dynamite to set off a cultural avalanche in Europe.)

At any rate, Swift made it from Ireland to London just in time to cash in on the power of the newborn press to sway public opinion and to make or break political careers. One of the most influential politicians when Swift arrived was Robert Walpole, First Earl of Orford—a man accustomed to doing things in the old way. He was smooth as a mink at making connections in court circles, but he would by no means lower himself to hobnob with those ghastly writers swamping their stomachs with coffee. So though Walpole met with Swift once, he treated him rather rudely. Swift retaliated by writing a broadsheet filled with phony allegations that ran the man who'd spurned him through the muck and helped to permanently damage his reputation.

On the other hand, Walpole's leading political opponent—Robert Harley, First Earl of Oxford—could see a promising new possibility when it raised its head. He met regularly with Swift, leaked torrents of inside news to him, solicited his advice on major decisions, and made him feel like a co-conspirator, a partner in the process of government. (Of course he also *hid* vast amounts of fact from Swift, something Jonathan never seems to have caught on to.) This swelled Swift's ego like a blimp, and our boy Jonathan wrote reams of prose that made Harley look like an indispensable mainstay of the state.



The newspapers of the American colonies weren't any better. They went into fits of hysteria when the British tried to get the colonists to pay part of the costs of the English troops which had been defending Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania against the French and the Indians. Why did the press blow the minor taxes the Brits levied out of all proportion and help precipitate a revolution? Because the method of taxation the English chose raised the cost of paper and shaved a few farthings off publishers' profits.

Meanwhile, one of Benjamin Franklin's first journalistic forays was a virulent attack on Cotton Mather. What was Franklin lacing into Mather for? Advocating a controversial technique for the prevention of the small pox epidemics that continually ravaged the colonial cities. The method Mather favored was an early version of inoculation. Franklin's unresearched diatribes helped kill off thousands of

Benjamin Franklin's unresearched diatribes helped kill off thousands of innocents.

innocents. Nothing much has changed since then. Ah, how heroic is the press in a free society!



Back in the mid-nineteenth century, when something like eleven newspapers were fighting ferociously for circulation in New York City, a young part-time journalist named Edgar Allan Poe carried out a secret mission for the *New York Sun*. He wrote up a group of British adventurers who had built a propeller-driven balloon, had taken off to cross the English Channel, run into contrary winds, and had been blown across the Atlantic to a beach in Virginia, thus effecting the first aerial transatlantic crossing. This was big news. The *Sun's* unnamed correspondent was the first to reach Virginia's coast and interview the intrepid airmen about their perilous flight across the ocean.

The *Sun* ran new stories of the balloonist's adventures on the front page every day, and circulation leaped mightily, leaving New York's remaining papers in the dust. So all of them "sent reporters" down to Virginia and began cranking out their own exclusive interviews with the Brits. There was only one small problem: There was no bal-

loon, no balloonists, and no transatlantic crossing. But the papers were no more concerned with truth than they'd been in Ben Franklin's day. They just wanted a hot story, even if they had to make it up by rewriting what had appeared someplace else.



When Fidel Castro launched one of his Keystone Comedy-style invasions of Cuba, his rather rusty ship got bogged down in the mangrove roots about a mile offshore, so it was impossible to unload the supplies and ammunition. Castro's men, all 30 or so of them, had to wade 5270 feet in water up to their necks to get ashore, seriously moistening their gunpowder and their weapons in the process. By the time they reached the beach they were exhausted.

Then Batista's troops spotted them as they crawled inland and managed to wipe out all but three—Castro and two others. The trio of survivors took refuge in a cane field, but the Batista troops knew they were in there somewhere. So they combed one row of cane after another, while Fidel and his two companions lay still on their bellies and avoided even a belch or a whisper to elude detection. Then the Batista folks got fed up and started to set the fields on fire. Unfortunately for history, they missed the one in which Fidel and his somewhat diminished army of two were ensconced.

That night, when the Batista boys decided to get some sleep, Fidel counted heads—which took about half a second—and inventoried his arsenal. There was one rifle left. The future “savior” of Cuba (poor Cuba) was elated. He spent the rest of the night lecturing his unfortunate duo of followers. The theme of his exuberant, though hushed oration? “We have won the Revolution!!!!” I am not kidding. (Neither was Fidel.) How ironic that this real life Ayn-Randian hero turned out to be a Leninist monster.

But you haven't heard the last of Fidel yet. Once the wily leader had escaped the sugar field, he managed to triple the size of his army—bringing it up to a grand total of seven. Then some of his supporters persuaded the *New York Times* to send a reporter down to the Sierra Madres for a week of interviews. Fidel ordered his men to change costumes and identities every hour or two, then report for duty, supposedly as the heads of massive brigades camped out in the neighboring hills. Each time one of his septet reappeared as a supposedly different member of the revolutionary corps, the entrant would say something like, “Comrade exigente, I have 1000 men stationed three miles away. Do you want me to move them closer to the urinals?”

After seven days of this, the *New York Times* reporter was convinced that the Maximum Leader had roughly 10,000 hard-bitten soldiers salted away among the pine trees, and that the revolutionary force was unbeatable. The scribe wrote this “indisputable fact” up in a highly-touted series on the “Cuban insurrection.” Journalists, being an independent-minded lot, immediately scrambled to Cuba to replicate the *Times*' scoop. *Life*, *Look*, and all three networks sent in their best reporters. Fidel repeated the costume-changing trick. The result: Every media outlet in sight parroted the *Times*' conclusion that Fidel and his massive army had practically taken Cuba already.

A year later, when Batista finally couldn't stand being made a fool of by the American press anymore, he decamped. Then *The New*

Yorker ran a cartoon with a picture of Fidel and the caption, “I got my job in the *New York Times*.” I doubt that many people understood the precision of the joke.



Watch the weekend talk shows in which Washington “reporters” swap their “insider” data. Note the pools from which their data is gathered: press conferences, not-for-attribution briefings (meaning more press conferences), and “my sources.” In other words, each reporter is simply picking up scraps others have gathered for him or her and handed out on a platter. Not a one is reporting (with the exception of Georgie Anne Geyer, who stays out of Washington). None is digging. None is going underground. None is moving from the level of what's offered for official presentation to the level of what's held in secrecy. None is piercing the veil, as I had to when researching my story on the kids of New York's private schools. Okay, granted that my story led to threats of ending my publishing career. The threats were made by some of the wealthiest and most influential men in the Big Apple, the core of the publishing world. The gentlemen using phrases like, “You are putting your head in the noose, Mr. Bloom,” were on the boards of New York's most prestigious schools for the elite. But isn't wading your way through threats and attacks part of the job?

Granted that each Washington reporter knows that to retain access to press conferences, briefings, and sources, he or she must abide by a set of unwritten and shamefully unreported rules, rules which seriously constrain what he or she can say. Also granted that without this access, a reporter would no longer have a standard Washington career. But whoever said that journalism is about fol-

None is moving from the level of what's offered for official presentation to the level of what's held in secrecy.

lowing a standard pattern? Isn't reporting all about rule-breaking to pierce the shroud and uncover what's really going on? Isn't it about discovering those well-kept secrets and soaring insights most likely to have an impact on our lives and to explain the hows, whats, whens, wheres, and whys? If not you, as a reporter, then who? And if not now, when?



"Karl Marx held that history is shaped by control of the means of production. In our times history is shaped by control of the means of communication." —Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

"Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed. He who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who executes statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes or decisions possible or impossible to execute." —Abraham Lincoln

"He who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who executes statutes or pronounces decisions."



It's not enough to invent something fantastic, you have to "promote" it.

A nineteenth-century Floridian, John Gory, trying to keep the town of Apalachicola's population from contracting a fever that racked the multitudes every summer. In 1850, Gory invented refrigeration and air conditioning. Alas, the clever tinkerer was better at inventing than at promoting his invention. He was blind to the necessity of creating a climate of belief that gets all the members of a skittish herd moving in the same direction. Normal human beings are afraid of straying from the pack. They are frightened at the thought of finding merit in something they might be ridiculed for championing. Gory and his air conditioners were ridiculed by no less an authority than the writers of the *New York Times*, the lead animals in the herd. So a man whose gizmos could have improved many a Southerner's life died in abject poverty. Air conditioning and refrigeration were denied to mankind until a German inventor more skillful at manipulating the perceptions of the herd came along.

Charles Darwin was far less naïve than Gory. He didn't just theorize and marshal evidence, then leave it at that. Darwin marshaled support, working hard to line up the backing of the top scientists of his day. Darwin already had one herd-head-turner going for him. His family was scientifically illustrious. The famous evolutionary theorist Erasmus Darwin was his grandfather. Anything with the Darwin name on it had an automatic attraction for the scientific sheep of the day. Yet Darwin worked methodically to court the friendship of scientific opinion-makers. When Alfred Russel Wallace showed up in England having already written up ideas Darwin had only penciled in, Darwin's influential friends lined up to support Chuck's prior claim to the concepts. They turned down the claims of Wallace, a stranger to them.

When Darwin finally published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859, he relied on another friend, the famous T.H. Huxley, to publicize his ideas. Said Huxley, "I am sharpening up my claws and beak in readiness." Darwin kept a list of the men he'd have to win over, and methodically checked off each one he was able to "convert." The father of evolution knew that science is more than a struggle for truth, it's a struggle for social influence, a game of manipulating the herd.

Dante was equally savvy. He became known as a great poet through unabashed self-promotion. Thirteenth-century poets were poor, anonymous creatures. But Dante Alighieri lusted after the kind

of fame poets had had in the long-lost days of Rome. So he wrote a poem

of epic proportions and made himself the hero. Then he structured the plot to leave the impression that the greatest of all earthly poets was, well, who else? Dante Alighieri. Now watch carefully as the Florentine wannabe makes the bunny of renown emerge from a hat. The Roman Virgil was widely acknowledged as the greatest poet who had ever lived. But Dante was a relative unknown. So Dante made Virgil his fictional guide through hell and purgatory, thus putting himself in Virgil's league. When the pair reached heaven, Virgil had to stay behind. Only Dante was allowed in. The implication: that Dante picked up where Virgil had left off, and that the lad from Florence had transcended the old Roman entirely.

This flagrant act of self-promotion worked. In fact, it snowballed. After he died, Florence promoted the theme of Dante as the world's greatest poet. Why? To promote Florence as a leading city of the arts and an all-round admirable town.



"The press has become the greatest power within the Western countries, more powerful than the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary." —Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

"Hostile newspapers are more to be dreaded than a hundred thousand bayonets." —Napoleon

"The press leads the public." —Japanese saying

"The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism in society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.... It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind, who harness old social forces and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world." —Edward Bernays



We see what we're told is there, not what is. A 1989 survey showed that drug use and crime were on a par in the US and Canada. But Americans ranked drugs as their number-one problem and crime as their third. Canadians saw drugs as insignificant and ranked crime a lowly twentieth on the list of their dilemmas. The facts were the same, but the perceptions were different. Why? Because the headlines in the two countries were different.



Molly Ivins, a highly respected journalist who's worked for the *New York Times*, among other papers, wrote in the *Houston Journalism Review*: "You can find out more about what's going on at the state capitol by spending one night drinking with the capitol press corps than you can in months of reading the papers those reporters write for. The same is true of City Hall reporters, court reporters, police reporters, education writers, any of us. In city rooms and in the bars where newspeople drink you can find out what's going on. You can't find it in the papers."²



Then there are the many cases in which the press manufactures or manipulates the news. According to the *New York Times Book Review*, Oliver North "describes being in the office of the Reagan aide, Pat Buchanan, working on an announcement of the capture of the *Achille Lauro* terrorist, when Niles Latham, an editor at the *New York Post*, called to ask Mr. Buchanan to make the President say, 'You can run, but you can't hide,' so the paper could use it as the front page headline. Mr. Buchanan obligingly wrote the line into the President's remarks."³



From 1968 to 1988, the average length of a TV news sound bite allotted to a presidential candidate fell from 43 seconds to 9.8. Meanwhile, pictures of the candidates with **none** of his words tripled. This gave the TV producer nearly total power to reshape or distort a candidate's message.



A 1990 survey showed that an astonishing number of congressmen and other elected officials believed that the pyramids may have been built by aliens. Even worse, one of the groups that came out with the highest levels of general ignorance were newspaper editors. Over 50 percent of these media leaders felt that dinosaurs and humans had inhabited the earth at the same time. (Humans, in fact, didn't show up until some 65 million years after the dinosaurs had abandoned their bones and departed from the scene.) The bottom line: The men and women spooning facts into the brains of most Americans have apparently gotten their scientific education from the Flintstones.

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Writes Molly Ivins: "One of the most depressing aspects of reporters as a group is that they tend to be fairly ignorant themselves. There is no excuse for it, and there is a complete cure for it. Read, read, read."⁴

Further muddling the information we receive from overseas is the fact, reported by historian and former *New York Times* journalist Robert Darnton, that "few foreign correspondents speak the language of the country they cover."⁵ So-called foreign reporters simply regurgitate preconceptions. English correspondents write of "the England of Dickens" and those in France portray "the France of Victor Hugo, with some Maurice Chevalier thrown in." What justifies this? Says Darnton: "Newspaper stories must fit a culture's preconceptions of news."

Anyone who's been interviewed by the press knows that his so-called quotes will be wild distortions of his original statements, yet writers refuse to check the accuracy of their notes with the source. Why? Says one former investigative reporter: "We don't like to be confronted with our own mistakes." What's more, we "are tired of the story and don't want to do more work."⁶



Writers respond to the world with a kind of herd instinct. They see which direction the animals on either side of them are rushing, and don't bother to notice the real world through which the pack is moving. Yet they pretend to report on the real world. What's worse, they often fool their readers into believing that this is true.

"You can find out more about what's going on at the state capitol by spending one night drinking with the capitol press corps than you can in months of reading the papers those reporters write for."

Today, I read 30 different publications, most of them obscure periodicals from both the left and right.

So I am angry at the press. I am angry at its dishonesty. I am infuriated by its moral corruption. I am disgusted with its laziness and lack of intellectual independence. I am sickened by its phony self-image. And I am furious that I was lied to in my youth. I hate *The Reporter* for telling me about Chiang Kai Check's atrocities while hiding Mao's. I hate the *Village Voice* for telling me about My Lai without informing me that the standard Viet Cong procedure for winning the hearts and minds of villagers was to take the most prominent village family—usually a dozen or more grandparents, uncles, aunts, mothers, fathers, children, and infants—tie them to a few canisters of dynamite in the town square, then detonate the charge. I hate the press for turning me into a war protester against Nixon and Johnson when I should have been shouting just as loudly against Ho Chi Minh. And I am disconcerted that the tribe they have slated for the next Cambodian-style annihilation is my own.

Today, I read 30 different publications, most of them obscure periodicals from both the left and right. I never want to be deceived again. And I don't want to see my own people victimized. Though I can't for the hell of me figure out how to stop it.

I could give you numerous other examples from personal experience and subsequent research, but it's a long story and will have to wait for some other time. The surprising part is that just like Jonathan Swift, today's journalists regard themselves as not only the guardians of honesty, morality and truth, but think they're incorruptible. Human nature is so peculiar. In fact, it's a bit worse than that—it's downright dangerous. And the press is among the most dangerous of all.

Well, I see I've put you to sleep. But just remember, all you need is an automatic weapon and a sharp knife and you too can use Yasir Arafat's keys to publicity success. If you handle them properly, the press will fall for anything. Especially if it promises to spill a lot of blood.

Endnotes

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