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How The Major U.S. Media Are Undermining Democracy

JEAN JEAN-PIERRE

The ascendancy of democracy, we are often reminded, is perhaps America's most remarkable contribution to the world. Indeed, since Christianity's conquest of Europe in the fourth century A.D., no other society has had as profound an impact on the globe than United States form of government. However, just as the Christian church grew through centuries into a very hierarchical establishment capable of long cycles of injustice and prejudice, our modern day exporters of democracy must also acknowledge all the ills and corruption that are also inherent to their system.

Events during the past few decades should teach us that the Republic of the United States—emphasis is added on Republic since we are not really a democracy as the last presidential election has so convincingly proved—is at greater risk than ever of becoming a de facto oligarchy. With a few exceptions, we are witnessing a trend where a small class of people has the ability to be either elected or selected to run the affairs of this only world superpower. Chief among the reasons is the preposterously huge amount of money politicians and political parties must raise to pay the major media outlets to run their political ads. During the political season of 1999-2000, both the Democratic and Republican parties collected billions of dollars to finance both the primary and general presidential elections. With so much money at stake, how do we expect the major United States media to do the professional job worthy of the so-called fourth power that they purport to represent?

Consider this, according to *The Media Monopoly*, written by Ben Bagdikian:

At the end of World War II, for example, 80 percent of the daily newspapers in the United States were independently owned, but 1989 the proportion was reversed, with 80 percent owned by corporate chains. In 1981 twenty corporations controlled most of the business of the country's 11,000 magazines, but only seven years later that number had shrunk to three.¹

Bagdikian notes that with each passing year and each new edition of this book, "the number of controlling firms in all media has shrunk: from fifty corporations in 1984 to twenty-six in 1987, followed by twenty-

1. BEN H. BAGDIKIAN, *THE MEDIA MONOPOLY* 4 (5th ed. 1997).

three in 1990, and less than twenty in 1993. In 1996 the number of media corporations with dominant power in society is closer to ten.”² Today, with the recent purchase of Time Warner Communications by America On Line, we are down to less than fifteen. Thanks to government deregulation in the early 1980s and industry consolidation in the 1990s, these ever-dwindling numbers of big media owners are setting the agenda regulating political and social discourse in this country.³ Yes, talk radio allows us to “vent our spleen” as the late Steve Allen used to say. But how much can we dialogue with hosts who reflexively show the greatest sign of impatience the moment they realize that we do not agree with them? Although the internet has been held out as offering the promise of altering our definition of “mass” in “mass media,”⁴ the internet is not as readily available as traditional media resources and “even now, in the Internet’s infancy, concerted corporate efforts are turning the Internet into the most direct mass merchandizing vehicle ever invented.”⁵ With this trend, in spite of the recent Enron debacle, the future could not look better for corporate America.

As a result of the growing oligarchical nature of United States mass media, journalists find themselves abjuring the very essence of their profession. They begin to lose their independence. They begin playing the role of stenographers because the very nature of big businesses dictates that the bottom line must be reached by “working” with government officials and not offending advertisers. Today reporters are often pressured to quickly manufacture a news product that satisfies all the interests that patronize the media conglomerates for which they work. In other words, capitalism, which is one of the cornerstones of United States democracy, is fast becoming one of the most potent threats to that very system it supports by corrupting the free press, a *sine qua none* for the welfare of a democratic society. Can we trust NBC to report on the scandalous amount of money United States government is budgeting every year for the Pentagon in the post cold war era when the network’s parent company, General Electric, is the recipient of huge military contracts?

For example, are we to really believe that Fox News Cable Network has no agenda because their motto is “We report, You decide”? Judge for yourself. In 1997, two very experienced husband-and-wife investigative reporters prepared for Tampa-based WTVT, a Fox News affiliate, an exposé on food giant Monsanto’s use of bovine growth hor-

2. *Id.* at xiii.

3. *See generally* BAGDIKIAN, *supra* note 1, chapters 1- 3, 13.

4. *Id.* at xi.

5. *Id.*

mone (BGH) in cow's milk. Titled "Mystery in your Milk," the piece was set to run on February 21, 1997. In it, reputed scientists affirmed that BGH is used by Monsanto to increase its cow's milk production by 15%. They further added that BGH contains an extra amino acid, methionine, not found in natural milk, that is capable of causing breast and colon cancer. Claiming the story was inaccurate, Monsanto's attorney requested that Fox News reconsider running the report. After months of re-writes, Fox News chairman Roger Ailes offered the reporters \$200,000 each to quash the story. They refused and were subsequently fired. They sued, and last August one of them won a \$425,000 award. The other reporter and Fox News as well are respectively appealing. Meanwhile the couple had to sell their home and depleted most of their savings.⁶

Another "small" problem lies in the fact that as a democratic republic, we vote for our representatives who as candidates depend on the media to broadcast their ads so they can get elected. Those same media that receive huge sums of money are supposed to inform us objectively about those same politicians. It is absolutely clear that a conflict of interest will result from this type of closeness. It is clearer this relationship existing among most media organizations and politicians is incestuous at best. Every year at a redwood retreat about seventy miles north of San Francisco called Bohemian Grove, a great number of United States government officials and corporate elite gather each summer for two weeks of relaxed schmoozing and speechmaking. Rest assured that you will never read about this annual hideaway in the major press.⁷ This mutual admiration society logically engenders the proverbial "revolving door syndrome" in Washington. Nothing new. Bill Moyers, William Safire, and many others have worked in the past for government. Except today it is different in that they go back and forth. Political pundit Pat Buchanan leaves his gig at CNN every four years to run for president; Mary Matelin, who once worked for Reagan, left CNN last year to work for George W. Bush. Mrs. Matelin, who is now an assistant to Vice-President Cheney, was briefly replaced at CNN by Linda Chavez who used to work for the Reagan administration.

Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon wrote in their 1993 book *Adventures in Medialand* that when Katherine Graham, owner of the *Washington Post*, threw a dinner party for Bill Clinton and Al Gore a few weeks after their November 1992 victory, she at one point raised her glass in

6. See FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), "We Paid \$3 Billion for These Stations. We'll Decide What the News Is", EXTRA! UPDATE, June 1998, available at <http://www.fair.org/extra/9806/foxbgh.htm>.

7. JEFF COHEN & NORMAN SOLOMON, *ADVENTURES IN MEDIALAND* 2-4 (1993).

toast and said "These occasions have value. They create relationships beyond the office."⁸ According to the same authors, further acknowledging this intimacy, Ms. Graham, in a speech to senior Central Intelligence Agency officials at the agency's headquarters four years earlier, candidly pointed: "'There are some things the general public does not need to know and shouldn't,' she said 'I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep its secrets and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows.'"⁹ Katherine Graham has acknowledged the at times close relationship between herself and powerful politicians stating "There have been instances, 'in which secrets have been leaked to us which we thought were so dangerous that we went to them [U.S. officials] and told them that they had been leaked to us and did not print them.'"¹⁰ If this is the attitude of the same well respected *Washington Post* which gave us Watergate story, is it not fair to ponder and even speculate on what the newspaper knows but decides not to tell us?

Political reporters, anchors and pundits alike, especially those who cover Washington on a day-to-day basis, are protective of Washington and its political culture. Let's take for example the last presidential election. Do we expect any of the major media journalists to say that George W. Bush won on a technicality? Ironically, most of the news network routinely broadcast within their news programs spoofs from Jay Leno, David Letterman, and *Saturday Night Live* about our new president, while the news department of those network would not dare address the content of those parodies themselves.

Another byproduct of the close relationship between the media and the press is an unhealthy reliance on official government sources. The major media bring stories to us tardily, publish unchallenged the "scoops" they get from government officials and, in the case of the so-called "third world," being too indolent to dig beneath the surface, they take the facile path where stereotypes are too often used to define countries and their peoples. For example, in 1989, claiming that President Bush senior lost his patience with United States former ally and School of the Americas graduate dictator Manuel Noriega, the United States invaded Panama. In the process, hundreds of civilians were killed during the military operation. The story had been reported throughout Latin America and elsewhere days after the invasion. Yet, it took about nine months for CBS's *60 Minutes* to reveal the fact that Panamanians civilians were incinerated while they slept in the early hours of the military

8. *Id.* at 8.

9. *Id.* at 9.

10. *Id.*

action. Even after the *60 Minutes* exposé, most other major United States media outlets did not bother relating the story. This attitude¹¹ causes many Americans to depend on an unregulated and sometimes unreliable Internet that gives us access to *The Guardian* in Britain, the BBC, and other alternative news sources.

My personal experience has been shaped by years of covering events in Haiti as a freelance journalist for New York's *Village Voice*. Despite the plethora of articles written about Haiti over the years, most major United States media outlets, "with few exceptions, continue to see Haiti through the prism established by racist Hollywood movies since the 30s. We are poor, dark, wild, weird; we are the bulwark of some "black magic religion"¹² called "Vodou" which they persist on spelling "Voodoo" and we were once led for forty years by a megalomaniac physician called François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his rotund son, Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. Max Frankel, "the *New York Times* correspondent in the region during the early 60s (and later the paper's editor until he retired recently), rarely reported the atrocities of François Duvalier."¹³ He rarely said anything about allegations that the United States Central Intelligence Agency was involved in Haiti's politics. "Yet, Frankel is heralded by many as one of the better reporters to cover the region at the time."¹⁴

This silence was not confined to the *New York Times*. Indeed, over the past forty years, the muted coverage of Haiti has perhaps been sustained by all major media outlets in the United States including the Associated Press. Another example is Associated Press correspondent Art Kendal, who wrote during the 1970s and 1980s and "seemed to take his information routinely from a government-produced daily radio program called *La Voix de la Republique d'Haiti*."¹⁵ "Haiti's private radio stations were required to air this daily dose of Duvalier propaganda; Kendal didn't have that excuse."¹⁶ "Kendal, who was by training a schoolteacher, used to broadcast a news segment in English every night; to the few Haitians who could understand him, the content was virtually straight Haitian government official bulletins."¹⁷

Since the bloody military overthrow in 1991 of Jean Bertrand Aristide, who in 1990 became the first democratically elected president of

11. For more examples, see COHEN & SOLOMON, *supra* note 7, Part X.

12. Jean Jean-Pierre, *Voodoo Journalism: Stereotypes, Official Sources Shape Reporting On Haiti*, EXTRA, July/Aug. 1996, at 24.

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

Haiti, violence has been the main theme permeating most reports from the country. Granted, the Duvalier regime along with a few before and after it institutionalized political violence, but should a whole citizenry be stigmatized for the actions of a few?¹⁸ While we must acknowledge that there is an epidemic of violent incidents taking place today in Haiti, do Haitians have violent tendencies as it has been suggested so often in the major United States press? Florida-based journalist and author Bernard Diederich, who retired a few years ago after covering Haiti and other places in the region since 1957 for many mainstream United States publications “believes that reporters have always had a difficult time covering Haiti because of a culture that, though in the midst of Western civilization, appears alien to them.”¹⁹ In an interview for an article I wrote in 1996 Diederich observed:

“Lately the exotic has been gradually replaced by the violence committed by a few in a population of more than 8 million crowding such a small place,” he said. Diederich, who was jailed by François Duvalier in 1963, feels that “many foreign journalists already assume that Haiti is a violent place simply because of the image projected by the media whenever there is a political crisis there.” “For my nearly 40 years living in Haiti, Florida, the Dominican Republic, Salvador, Nicaragua,” said Diederich, “I have never found a place where the people live more harmoniously than Haiti.”²⁰

Jack Lule chronicles in wonderful detail in his book *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* the way in which *New York Times* reporter William Lawrence Rohter interacted with and was influenced by the government of the United States in his reporting on Haiti.²¹ In particular, Lule focuses on how the *New York Times* “mislead and misinformed their readers” by failing to “substantially probe ties between FRAPH [A group called Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti, a paramilitary group created after the 1991 coup] and the United States” in particular the Central Intelligence Agency.²²

Covering the return of Aristide in 1994, “I was astounded by the candidness of some foreign journalists as to the main reason they were in Haiti: to focus on violence.” “At the famous Hotel Oloffson, an ABC staffer, after speaking on the radio with his Haitian stringer, turned to me and said, ‘There is not much today. Not even one single body has been

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* (quoting an interview with Bernard Diederich).

21. JACK LULE, *DAILY NEWS, ETERNAL STORIES: THE MYTHOLOGICAL ROLE OF JOURNALISM* (2001).

22. *Id.* at 163.

found in the streets.”²³ It is evident based on my experience as a reporter in Haiti that “most foreign journalists in Haiti, who generally do not speak either Creole or French, receive their cues from the U.S. State Department or the Pentagon.”²⁴

And then there is “the Phrase,” attributed to Haitian journalist/author Joel Dreyfuss. “The Phrase” refers to what is always mentioned in almost every report on Haiti: “the poorest country in the Northern hemisphere.”²⁵ Of course we already know how poor Haiti is. And we know that in most articles reporters must include what is called “background,” which is nothing more than a reminder of the genesis of the story.²⁶ But, how many times must we be reminded that Haiti is so poor? How often do we read that the United States is the richest country of the world? Is it not a given? From the slum shots we always see on TV, newspapers and magazines to a sub-text that alludes to the country’s violence, what often transpires is a thin veil of contempt and frankly racism.²⁷ We seldom see a contrasting picture. It is as if Port-au-Prince the capital is interchangeably Haiti the country.

The Haitian people must be blamed for their own problems. But we can’t overlook centuries of ostracism as a price paid by the first revolutionary black nation and the first country to abolish slavery in the world. After all, it took the United States sixty-five years to recognize Haiti as a free black nation disregarding the fact that Haiti had helped America gaining its independence from England in 1776. And, the \$1million indemnity Haiti had to pay to France after it kicked Napoleon’s mighty army out in 1804 for recognition left the country financially strapped for more than a century. But it is obviously too much to ask from reporters working for major United States media outlets who cover Haiti and the rest of the so-called “third world” to demonstrate the same kind of respect and sensibility they show when writing about other countries well regarded by Washington.

23. Jean-Pierre, *supra* note 12, at 24.

24. *Id.* The article contains further examples of inaccurate and biased reporting on Haiti that resulted from reliance on reports from the government of the United States.

25. Posting of Bob Corbett, corbette@Webster.edu, to Haiti mailing list, Haiti@lists.webster.edu (Nov. 7, 2000) (copy on file with author); Posting of Bob Corbett, corbette@webster.edu, Marrie Archer, Marcher@nchr.org, to Haiti mailing list, Haiti@lists.webster.edu (Nov. 5, 2000) (copy on file with author).

26. See LULE, *supra* note 21, at 166-68 (describing how reporter William Lawrence Rohter’s portrayal of Haitian people and society “was a degradation of Haitian life”).

27. For more discussion on institutional racism within the United States media see COHEN & SOLOMON, *supra* note 7, at 89-109.