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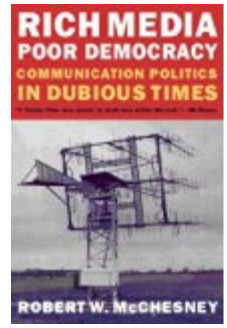
Robert W. McChesney. ***Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times.*** Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. 427 pp. $32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56584-634-0.



Reviewed by Donna Halper

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Rich Media, Poor Democracy

Written by well-known media critic Robert W. McChesney, ***Rich Media, Poor Democracy*** is a book that world historians may overlook, since many seem to think the study of mass media is less important than the study of market economies or migration. But as the conglomerates which own the media become more global, world historians would be well advised to pay attention to them, since they have the power to influence some of the very policies and attitudes that world historians DO study.

Robert McChesney, a University of Illinois professor who has written a number of books and articles about media effects and media history, addresses both of these topics in his new book. From the outset, he makes his concerns very clear. "This book is about the media crisis in the United States (and world) today... the decline of journalism and the hypercommercialization of culture; the anti-democratic manner by which communication policy making has been and is being conducted in the United States; the close relationship of the media system to the broader (globalizing and neoliberal) capitalist economy... ; and the way the Internet is being incorporated into the heart of the corporate communication system, decidedly undermining the democratic potential envisioned by its founders" (p. iv).

In examining how the "for-profit, highly concentrated, advertising-saturated corporate media system" undermines democracy, McChesney first explains the history of these corporate media, showing how changes in government policies (often with no input whatsoever from the average citizen) led to a small number of players owning the vast majority of the media outlets. In this new climate of oligopoly, one conglomerate, Clear Channel Communications, led by CEO Lowry Mays, owns over 900 radio stations and 19 television stations, and has equity interest in several hundred international broadcasting properties, as well as an outdoor advertising firm and a concert promotion company.

Another, the Walt Disney Company, led by CEO Michael Eisner, owns the ABC television network (as well as abc.com, the Go network, and Disney.com on the Internet); nearly 30 radio stations and a children's radio network (Radio Disney); 80% of the cable sports channel ESPN (and its Spanish counterpart); movie and home video companies that include Walt Disney, Touchstone, Miramax, and Buena Vista; a cable channel (the Disney Channel) with subsidiaries in most major foreign countries; over 660 stores which carry Disney merchandise, several record companies, and of course, the famous theme parks. Thus, the giant media companies not only produce content (such as movies, compact discs, films, magazines) but also control the channels by which their products are distributed world-wide. The powerful conglomerates are also able to exert greater control over the journalists they employ: since all of the networks are now owned by a handful of major corporations, if a journalist wants to take a stand and risk getting fired, there are fewer places left to seek another job.

McChesney believes news coverage has suffered as a result of media consolidation: not only have more commercial minutes been added to each hour, but news departments are no longer seen as a public service. Rather, they are seen as a potential profit center, and stories about the struggles of the urban poor, the lack of affordable housing, or the widening gap between what CEOs earn and what their workers earn are unlikely to get air time, since the target audience is now consumers with disposable income.

Sponsors want the "upscale" listener or viewer, and they will pay large sums to attract that person's attention. So, in-depth reporting on controversial issues is frowned upon, unless it encourages the audience to buy something. McChesney cites examples of networks censoring news stories that were perceived as anti-business. He shows how news reporters are expected to promote their network's entertainment features, and how sportscasters are required to wear the logos of corporate sponsors on camera (pp. 58-9). There may be state-of-the-art graphics and opulent new studios, but McChesney believes the public is less informed than ever.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Broadcasters were supposed to represent the needs of their city of license. In the Radio Act of 1927, stations were told to operate in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity." Owners could make a profit, but they could not ignore their obligation to the audience: a certain amount of educational programming was mandated, as was a certain amount of community service. There had originally been opposition to allowing commercials on radio, but when the first major network (NBC) came along in late 1926, it was advertising revenue that paid for big name entertainers and important commentators; soon there was a consensus that radio could balance commercialism and good programming.

But McChesney does an effective job of showing how good intentions went astray. The National Association of Broadcasters, originally created in 1923 to give broadcasters in the smaller cities protection and representation, grew into a huge lobby which in modern times donates large sums of money to politicians to get favorable votes in congress. The major media CEOs also do this: McChesney notes how Rupert Murdoch (owner of over 130 newspapers world-wide, 23 magazines, a book publishing company, cable channels in Latin America, Asia, and Europe and in the United States, the Fox TV Network and the Fox News Channel) donated nearly $1 million in 'soft money' to Conservative Republican candidates during the years 1991-7. Murdoch is not alone in using his wealth to potentially influence elections; what makes this especially worrisome is that such influence can also extend to what kind of coverage a network gives a candidate, or allow an owner's political ideology to invade the supposed objectivity of the newsroom.

World historians may be wondering why "Rich Media, Poor Democracy" is being reviewed on H-World, rather than, on a media criticism website. After reading part 1, you will no longer wonder. McChesney details how corporations that are by and large American (Rupert Murdoch is one notable exception) have gained a foothold in foreign media, and are able to influence what kind of coverage those media provide. Because the media seldom report on themselves anymore (it is interesting to me that in all the expanded business news that stations do, they don't discuss their parent company's new acquisitions or what these mergers mean to the average citizen), it is distinctly possible that listeners, readers, or viewers of a local medium may not realize it is now controlled by Lowry Mays in San Antonio, Texas or Gerald Levin of Time/Warner in New York (which owns HBO, HBO International, Cinemax, CNN, CNN Espaol, Time/Warner Cable, Time/Life Books, a number of magazines, record companies, movie and video enterprises). Having first detailed in remarkably clear fashion the literally hundreds of mergers and acquisitions of the 1990s and how they affected the media landscape, McChesney then proceeds to show how this was allowed to occur with so little opposition.

In part 2, he offers a thorough historical overview of broadcasting regulation, and its eventual deregulation. For any world historian who wants to learn about how American mass media expanded from local to global, this section is especially useful. He also examines the fight for public broadcasting: beginning in the 1930s, a group of educators and reformers came to believe that radio was not living up to its potential, due largely to sponsors who insisted on bland, lowest common denominator programs. They attempted to persuade the broadcasting industry to adopt a system similar to the BBC, with a greater commitment to educational broadcasts. Why this reform movement failed (and how it deteriorated into the National Association of Broadcasters and the BBC insulting each other's programs, while the press in both countries carried stories of the debate over which system was better) makes for fascinating reading. The commercial networks had no intention of setting aside more free time for educational programming; despite their public pronouncements about how they supported the idea wholeheartedly, network executives worked behind the scenes to scuttle the plans of the reformers. (Forty years later, broadcasting executives also lobbied successfully to eliminate the "Fairness Doctrine," a ruling that had mandated presenting both sides of an issue and allowing responsible spokespersons to respond to perceived bias.)

In addition to his analysis of the failure of media reform and the struggles of educational broadcasters--struggles which continued even after the creation of so-called Public Broadcasting in the United States in the 1960s, McChesney uses the remainder of part 2 to examine the ups and down of the CBC and the BBC, showing how they too have been affected by commercialism, and what the impact has been on the usually unsuspecting public. He observes that British media critics are accusing the BBC of imitating the worst of American media practices, and abandoning their vaunted public service commitment in favor of projects that are more mass appeal, and more lucrative--one example is the pre-school children's show "Teletubbies," which was not only exported to numerous countries, but was also turned into a product that could be merchandised and marketed world-wide, thanks to a joint venture with Hasbro, a toy manufacturer (p. 253).

As a media historian, I have always been puzzled by what I feel is a grave oversight in our study of world political and cultural systems. I know of nothing that can influence public opinion more quickly than the media. Many historians have written that John F. Kennedy would not have become president had he not looked so good (and had his opponent, Richard Nixon not looked so bad) during the first televised debate in 1960. In our media-saturated world, whatever issues TV and print cover extensively remain in the public mind; the issues they only cover minimally are perceived as unimportant, and quickly forgotten. Governments have made good use of media censorship or media manipulation to make sure the populace only heard the 'ideologically-correct' version of a story.

Now that the mass media are more global, will the political battles in various countries be colored by the corporate concerns of those who own the media properties in those countries? There is already evidence that Rupert Murdoch promised to downplay or never mention Chinese human rights violations so that his cable company and his newspaper could get permission to operate in China. McChesney is concerned that such practices will become more common, with disastrous results for democracy. In part 3 of his book, he discusses what he sees as the most detrimental aspect of media consolidation--the lack of opposing or diverse opinions that might challenge the upper-class, pro-business bias he finds in most media outlets. Since deregulation, broadcasters are under no obligation to air opposing views, and many of them do not, thereby stifling debate and dissent.

Given the importance of mass communication and the role it plays in generating consent for states and private corporate power in modern world history, we who are historians and educators might benefit from doing more analysis on the intersection of private power, public policy, and mass media. Indeed, some work has been done on the state side of this equation, yet not nearly as much on the private side. By reading *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, we can begin to engage in this discussion with a better understanding of how corporate forces, both historically and contemporarily, have shaped public opinion and governance in modern world history. This book mostly focuses on North Atlantic World , but it is a worthy start toward bringing us some global understanding of this important topic.

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