

**The Media and Social Problems**  
**Douglas Kellner**  
(<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/>)

The media provide access to and construct social problems for large numbers of audiences throughout the world and in turn themselves have become a social problem in view of their multiple and complex effects, many negative. The media have been blamed by a wide spectrum of theorists and critics for promoting violence and sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism, and other oppressive social phenomena. Social problems connected with the media also involve allegedly harmful media influence on children and youth; pornography and the degradation of women and sexuality; advertising manipulation; and the promotion of excessive consumerism and materialism.

Empirical research on media effects into these areas has been mixed and highly contested. Many studies have affirmed that media have negative social effects and help reproduce a number of social problems, while other studies assert skepticism toward claims of negative media effects or attempt to confirm positive aspects of the media.<sup>1</sup> Empirical studies are often funded by institutions who have interests in escaping or deflecting criticism, or they are constrained by bias and limitations of various kinds. Yet dominant theories of the media are equally contested on whether the media promote serious social problems or have a more benign influence.

Conflicting theories and research into media effects have intensified debates throughout the world about media as a social problem. Research into media effects and linking the media with social problems emerged for the most part in the United States following the rise of broadcasting and mass media in the 1920s and 1930s (Czitrom, 1983), but now the debate and literature is international in scope (McQuail, 1994). Likewise, in an increasingly interconnected world, there are wide spread concerns about the media and national culture and the ways that global media inform politics, economics, and social and everyday life. Some critical research has focused on the political economy and ownership of the media, often perceiving corporate control of the media by ever fewer corporations as a major global social problem. Other studies in the past decades have researched the impact of global media on national cultures, attacking the cultural imperialism of Western media conglomerates or creeping Americanization of global media and consumer culture (Schiller, 1969; Tunstall, 1977). Other scholars see growing pluralization of world media sources and hybridization of global and local cultures, with an expanding literature exploring the ways that global media artifacts are received and used in local contexts (Lull, 1995; Canclini, 1995). This literature is divided into studies of how specific media or artifacts have promoted oppression in local or national contexts, or even globally, and literature that celebrates the democratizing or pluralizing effects of global media.

In this entry, I sort out a vast literature on the media and social problems, delineate what I consider key issues and positions, and indicate some of the ways in which the media construct and address social problems and can be seen themselves as a social problem. This will involve, first, analysis of the media, morality, and violence, followed by a section on the politics of representation and debates over the media class, race, gender, sexual, and other

forms of oppression. Then, I take up the literature on the media and democracy, setting out the position that corporate ownership and the political economy of the media constitute a social problem in which corporate media undermine democracy. I explore this latter issue with a study of the media in the United States over the past two decades and how corporate media have failed to address crucial social problems and have themselves become a social problem. Finally, I discuss how the Internet and new media can provide alternatives to the corporate media and provide some hope that more democratic media and societies can be produced that will address social problems being ignored and intensified in the current era of corporate and conservative hegemony.

### The Media, Morality, and Violence

During the 1930s, the Frankfurt school coined the term “culture industry” to signify the process of the industrialization of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives that drove the system. The critical theorists analyzed all mass-mediated cultural artifacts within the context of industrial production, in which the commodities of the culture industries exhibited the same features as other products of mass production: commodification, standardization, and massification. The culture industries had the specific function, however, of providing ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating individuals into its way of life (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972 and Kellner, 1989).

In their theories of the culture industries and critiques of mass culture, the Frankfurt School were among the first social theorists perceiving the importance of the media in the reproduction of contemporary societies. In their view, the media stand in the center of leisure activity, are important agents of socialization, mediators of political reality, and should thus be seen as major institutions of contemporary societies with a variety of economic, political, cultural and social effects.

The media are also perceived as a social problem for the Frankfurt School in that they produce a mass society that undermines individuality, democracy, and the salutary aspects of high culture. The classical view of Adorno and Horkheimer on the media and morality was that the media were purveyors of bourgeois and capitalist values which promoted the dominant ideology, constructing viewers as passive consumers of dominant norms and consumer behavior. On Adorno and Horkheimer’s model of the cultural industries, the standardized formats of mass-produced media genres imposed predictable experiences on audiences and helped produce a homogenized mass consciousness and society.

As communication studies began emerging in the 1930s and 1940s, and as theorists noted the power of propaganda in World War Two, a wide range of studies began appearing of the social effects of the media, promoting debate over the media and social problems and the media as a social problem. Some of the first empirical studies of the effects of film, for instance, criticized the cinema for promoting immorality, juvenile delinquency, and violence. The Motion Picture Research Council funded the Payne foundation to undertake detailed empirical studies of the impact of films on everyday life

and social behavior. Ten volumes were eventually published and a book Our Movie-Made Children (Forman, 1933) sensationalized the Payne findings, triggering debates about the media and how they inflamed social problems like crime, youth problems, sexual promiscuity, and what was perceived as undesirable social behavior (see Jowett, 1976).

The first models of mass communication built on studies of propaganda, film influence, advertising, and other media studies, assuming a direct and powerful influence of media on the audience. This model became known as the “bullet,” or “hypodermic,” theory, asserting that the media directly shape thought and behavior and thus induce social problems like crime and violence, rebellious social behavior, mindless consumption, or mass political behavior (see Lasswell, 1927 and the presentation of the model in DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). The propaganda role of the media in World War One and Two, growing concern about the social roles of film, advertising, and other media promoted debate about how the media were becoming a social problem that were intensifying a wide range of other problems ranging from crime to growing teen pregnancies.

This model of powerful and direct media effects was questioned in The People's Choice (1944) by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet who in a study of the influence of the media on voter's determined that it was “opinion leaders” who were the primary influence in voting behavior while the media exerted a “secondary” influence. Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz expanded this model in Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication (1955). Their “two-step flow” model claimed that opinion leaders are the primary influence in determining consumer and political choice, as well as attitudes and values. This model holds that the media do not have direct influence on behavior, but are mediated by primary groups and personal influence, thus in effect denying that the media themselves are a social problem but merely report on issues and reinforce behavior already dominant in a society.<sup>2</sup>

Yet both conservatives and left-liberal media critics continued to argue that the media had harmful social effects and promoted social problems. Growing juvenile delinquency in the 1950s was blamed on comic books (see Wertham 1996) and rock and roll was broadly attacked for having a wide range of subversive effects (Grossberg, 1992). In the 1960s, many different studies of the media and violence appeared throughout the world in response to growing violence in society and more permissive public media that increased representations of implicit sex and violence in film, television, and other media.

On the media and violence, some literature continued to assume that violent representations in the media directly cause social problems. A more sophisticated social ecology approach to violence and the media, however, was developed by George Gerbner and his colleagues in the Annenberg School of communication. Gerbner's group has studied the “cultural environment” of violence in the media, tracking increases in representations of violence and delineating “message systems” that depict who exercises violence, who is the victim, and what messages are associated with media violence. A “cultivation analysis” studies effects of violence and concludes that heavy consumers of media violence exhibit a “mean world syndrome” with effects that range from depression to fearful individuals

voting for rightwing law and order politicians, to the exhibition of violent behavior (Gerbner 2003).

Another approach to violence and the media is found in the work of Eysenck and Nias (1978) who argue that recurrent representations of violence in the media desensitize audiences to violent behavior and actions. The expansion of youth violence throughout the world and media exploitation of sensational instances of teen killings in the U.S., Britain, France, Germany and elsewhere intensified focus on media and violence and the ways that rap music, video and computer games, television and film, and other types of youth culture have promoted violence.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to seeing the media as a social problem because of growing media and societal violence, from the 1960s to the present, left-liberal and conservative media critics coalesced in arguing that mainstream media promote excessive consumerism and commodification. This view is argued in sociological terms in the work of Daniel Bell who asserts in The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1978) that a sensate-hedonistic culture exhibited in popular media and promoted by capitalist corporations was undermining core traditional values and producing an increasing amoral society. Bell called for a return to tradition and religion to counter this social trend that saw media culture as undermining morality, the work ethic, and traditional values.

In Amusing Ourselves To Death (1986), Neil Postman argued that popular media culture has become a major force of socialization and was subverting traditional literacy skills, thus undermining education. Postman criticized the negative social effects of the media and called for educators and citizens to intensify critique of the media. Extolling the virtues of book culture and literacy, Postman called for educational reform to counter the nefarious effects of media and consumer culture.

Indeed, there is by now a long tradition of studies that have discussed children and media like television (see Luke, 1990). Critics like Postman (1986) argue that excessive TV-viewing stunts cognitive growth, creates shortened attention spans, and habituates youth to fragmented, segmented, and imagistic cultural experiences and that thus television and other electronic media are a social problem for children. Defenders stress the educational benefits of some television, suggest that it is merely harmless entertainment, or argue that audiences construct their own meanings from popular media (Fiske, 1989 and 1993).

Negative depictions of the media and consumerism, youth hedonism, excessive materialism, and growing violence were contested by British cultural studies that claimed that the media were being scapegoated for a wide range of social problems. In Policing the Crisis (Hall et al, 1978), Stuart Hall and colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies analyzed what they took to be a media-induced “moral panic” about mugging and youth violence. The Birmingham group argued for an active audience that was able to critically dissect and make use of media material, arguing against the media manipulation perspective. Rooted in a classic article by Stuart Hall on “Encoding/Decoding” (1980), British cultural studies began studying how different groups

read television news, magazines, engaged in consumption, and made use of a broad range of media. In Everyday Television: Nationwide Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley (1978) studied how different audiences consumed TV news; Ien Ang (1984) and Katz and investigated how varying audiences in Holland, Israel, and elsewhere consumed and made use of the U.S. TV-series Dallas; and John Fiske (1989, 1993) wrote a series of books celebrating the active audience and consumer in a wide range of domains by audiences throughout the world.

Yet critics working within British cultural studies, individuals in a wide range of social movements, and academics from a variety of fields and positions began criticizing the media from the 1960s and to the present for promoting sexism, racism, homophobia, and other oppressive social phenomena. There was intense focus on the politics of representation, discriminating between negative and positive representations of major social groups and harmful and beneficial media effects, debates that coalesced under the rubric of the politics of representation.

### The Media and the Politics of Representation

The groundbreaking work of critical media theorists like the Frankfurt School, British Cultural Studies, and French structuralism and poststructuralism revealed that culture is a social construct, intrinsically linked to the vicissitudes of the social and historically specific milieu in which it is conceived and that gender, race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of social life are socially constructed in media representations (see Durham and Kellner, 2001). Media and cultural studies engaged in critical interrogations of the politics of representation, which drew upon feminist approaches and multicultural theories to fully analyze the functions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual preference and so on in the media. The social dimensions of media constructions are perceived by cultural studies as being vitally constitutive of audiences who appropriate and use texts.

While earlier British cultural studies engaged the progressive and oppositional potential of working class and then youth culture, under the pressure of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many adopted a feminist dimension, paid greater attention to race, ethnicity and nationality, and concentrated on sexuality. During this period, assorted discourses of race, gender, sex, nationality and so on circulated in response to social struggles and movements and were taken up in cultural studies to critically engage the politics of representation.<sup>4</sup> An increasingly complex, culturally hybrid and diasporic global culture and networked society calls for sophisticated understandings of the interplay of representations, politics, and the forms of media, and the readings in this section were groundbreaking in offering new perspectives on these problematics.

Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" (1992) contends that the cinematic apparatus legitimates and perpetuates a patriarchal order in which the object of the look is female and the subject of the look is male. At the time of its publication, Mulvey's article offered a radical tool for analyzing the representation of sexual difference and desire in cinema. The article was taken up by a range of feminist and other critics who attacked sexism and the objectification of women and sexuality in the media and the ways

that the camera induces spectators to assume certain subject positions. Yet Doane (1982) argued that focus on the male gaze defocused attention on the female spectator and offered an excessively monolithic model of the cinematic apparatus, and Richard Dyer (1982) discussed the complex ways that male spectators and gays negotiated the viewing of visual representations.

Many gay and lesbian theorists, however, decried the ways that media representations promoted homophobia by presenting negative representations of gay sexuality. Larry Gross' "Out of the mainstream: Sexual minorities and the mass media" (1989) argues that corporate media culture defines and frames sexuality in ways that marginalize gay and lesbians, and "symbolically annihilate" their lives. Stereotypic depiction of lesbians and gay men as "abnormal, and the suppression of positive or even 'unexceptional' portrayals, serve to maintain and police the boundaries of the moral order" (1989: 136) in Gross' view. He argues for alternative representations -- a call that has to a certain degree been heard and answered by gay and lesbian media producers coming to prominence in the contemporary era.

A variety of critics of color have engaged racist representations in film, television, and other domains of media culture. Herman Gray (1995), for example, scrutinizes the related trajectory of black representation on network television in an analysis that takes into account the structures and conventions of the medium as well as the sociopolitical conditions of textual production. Gray's examination of race and representation highlights the articulations between contemporary/recent representations of blacks and much earlier depictions. He argues that "our contemporary moment continues to be shaped discursively by representations of race and ethnicity that began in the formative years of television" (1992: 73). Contemporary cultural production is still in dialogue with these earliest moments, he writes, and he is aware of the regressive as well as the progressive aspects of this engagement. Importantly, Gray identifies certain turning points in television's representation of blackness, situating these "signal moments" within the cultural and political contexts in which they were generated. His analysis brings us to a confrontation with the possibilities of mass cultural texts engaging the politics of difference in a complex and meaningful way.

Many critics emphasized the importance of connecting representations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other subject positions to disclose how the media present socially derogatory representations of subordinate groups. bell hooks (1992) has been among the first and most prolific African-American feminist scholars to call attention to the interlockings of race, class, gender and additional markers of identity in the constitution of subjectivity. Early in her career she challenged feminists to recognize and confront the ways in which race and class inscribe women's (and men's) experiences. In "Eating the Other" (1992), hooks explores cultural constructions of the "Other" as an object of desire, tying such positioning to consumerism and commodification as well as to issues of racial domination and subordination. Cautioning against the seductiveness of celebrating "Otherness," hooks uses various media cultural artifacts -- clothing catalogs, films, rap music -- to debate issues of cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation, and to uncover the personal and political crosscurrents at work in mass media representation.

Critics also have stressed the need for incorporating perspectives and voices of individuals from a variety of global sites in debating issues of contemporary media and society. Chandra Mohanty (1991) raises issues of nation, identity and power in her oft-cited essay, "Through Western eyes." Mohanty challenges the appropriation and coding of "Third World women" in Western feminist scholarship, reminding us that the Third World is more complex, diverse and multiform than dominant constructions allow. Even the supposedly oppositional discourses of feminism often end up being reductive and ahistorical in terms of what Mohanty calls "Third World difference." Mohanty, like hooks, poses an important challenge to the notion that the category of "woman" can be considered without acknowledging class, ethnic and racial locations. Her objection is to "the elision ... between 'women' as a discursively constructed group and 'women' as material subjects of their own history" (1991: 56). "Women" in this discourse are constructed as objects, victims, and dependent, rather than as subjects of struggle and resistance in concrete historical conditions.

Media representations thus often construct women and their social problems as victims and objects, and mainstream media rarely present positive representations of women's movements or collective forms of struggle, rather focusing on women as individual examples of specific social problems like rape or domestic violence. In arguing for historically and culturally grounded understandings of women's multiple experiences and resistances, Mohanty presents important theoretical and methodological issues that challenge hegemonies and asymmetries of power in critical cultural studies as well as in mainstream scholarship. Mohanty's work also emphasizes that social and political changes have implications far beyond a single nation's borders.

Just as Mulvey, hooks, and Gray recognize the multilayered and overdetermined character of racial and gendered oppression in and by the media in English-speaking countries, Néstor García Canclini (1995) grapples with the theoretical consequences of the decentering of the nation-state and the impact of postmodern, postnational and global cultures on Latin American cultural production. In traditional media studies, Latin America's "Third World" status of economic dependency on the U.S. led to theories of "cultural imperialism" wherein the U.S. was perceived to have a hegemonic and monolithically destructive impact on the indigenous cultural production of its neighbors to the south. European scholars have also dissected the transnational flow of television, film, and other media on various national cultures and the ways that U.S. media corporations like Disney and other transnational media corporations have come to dominate many national cultures, to undermine local cultures, and to have a wide range of harmful cultural and media effects (Mattelart, 1979 and Mattelart and Mattelart, 1998).

Yet Latin American scholars and others also identify globalization as a force calling for fresh research perspectives; new technologies and new markets have impacts that are not simply oppressive, they argue, but rather make way for local and regional cultural production that has progressive potential. In his 1995 book Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity, García Canclini describes the far-reaching syntheses of modern and traditional culture in Latin America, and the way that postmodern global culture

is complexifying the situation. In the essay "Hybrid cultures, oblique powers," while still taking into account the exercise of power between "First" and "Third" world nations, García-Canclini argues that the mass media have not erased traditional Latin American forms of cultural expression; rather he claims that they have contributed to a cultural reconfiguration that has displaced established modes of thinking about culture. This transformation, however, is tied to other social shifts, including the expansion of metropolitan areas, the decrease in collective public action, and the unfinished projects of political change in many Latin American countries. The mass media constitute a new kind of public sphere as they simulate the integration of a disintegrated society. Contrasting media culture with traditional symbols of modernity -- monuments and museums -- García Canclini engages the central question of how the new, dense networks of economic and ideological crossings, and the deterritorializations and hybridities born of them, reconfigure power relations.

Focus on the politics of representation thus calls attention to the fact that culture is produced within relationships of domination and subordination and tends to reproduce or resist existing structures of power. Such a perspective also provides tools for cultural studies whereby the critic can denounce aspects of media forms and artifacts that reproduce class, gender, racial and diverse modes of domination and positively valorize aspects that subvert existing types of domination, or depict resistance and movements against them.

Issues of the politics of representation and violence and the media intersect in the impassioned debates over pornography. For a school of feminism and cultural conservatives, pornography and violence against women are one of the most problematic aspects of media culture. Anti-porn feminists argue that pornography objectifies women, that the industry dangerously exploits them, and that pornography promotes violence against women and debased sexuality. Pro-sex feminists and defenders of pornography, by contrast, argue the pornography exhibits a tabooed array of sexuality, provokes fantasy and awakens desire, and can be used by consumers in gratifying way.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, while there is wide spread agreement that the media constructs and provides access to social problems and that its representations are an important part of the social world, there is heated debate over whether the media have positive or negative social effects. Many critics argue that one-sided pro or con positions tended to be simplistic and reductive and that contextual analysis needs to be made on specific media effects of certain technologies or artifacts on specific audiences (Kellner, 1995 and 2003). This position also asserts that in general media have contradictory effects and that in many cases it is impossible to accurately discern or distinguish positive or negative features that are often interconnected.

Likewise, there are equally heated debates over whether the media promote or inhibit democracy. In the following sections I will contextualize the debate over media and democracy in terms of the nature and vicissitudes of democracy in a global world. This involves engaging the changing patterns of political economy of the media, expanding roles of the media in political life, rise of technologies like the Internet, and the ways that global

corporate media constitute a major social problem that also, paradoxically, points to possible solutions.

### The Media and Democracy

In classical democratic theory, the press and then the broadcast media were to provide information, ideas, and debate concerning issues of public significance in order to promote a democratic public sphere (Keane, 1991). The dual democratic functions of the press were to provide a check against excessive power and to inform the people concerning the major issues of public interest in order to allow their knowledgeable participation in public life. A free press was vitally necessary to maintain a democratic society and it is often claimed by champions of democracy that freedom of the press is one of the features that defines the superiority of democratic societies over competing social systems.

This concept of a free press was also extended to the broadcast media that were assigned a series of democratic responsibilities. In countries like Britain which developed a public service model of broadcasting, radio and then television was considered part of the public sector with important duties to reproduce the national culture and provide forums of information and debate for its citizens (Tracey, 1998). Even in the United States, where a private industry model of broadcasting came to dominate, in the Federal Communications Act of 1934 and subsequent legislation and court decisions broadcasting was to serve the “public interest, convenience, and necessity,” ascribing certain democratic functions to the media, until the overthrow of these strictures in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

In Western concepts of democracy, broadcasting was thus initially conceived as a public utility, with the airwaves established as part of the public domain, subject to regulation by the government to assure that broadcasting would meet its democratic responsibilities. Yet during the two centuries of the democratic revolutions, political and corporate powers often came to dominate the media and over the past two decades forces of deregulation have expanded private corporate control of dominant media. During the era of laissez-faire deregulation pursued in England by Thatcher and her successors and in the U.S. by the Reagan administration and subsequent regimes, much of the broadcasting regulatory apparatus was dismantled and giant corporations took over key broadcast media, or became increasingly powerful. In Europe and then throughout the world, starting with the Thatcher administration in the late 1970s, country after country deregulated its media, allowed a proliferation of private media corporations to compete with largely state-run or financed public broadcasting, and thus increased the range of corporate media organizations which weakened public service broadcasting, replacing it with a market model.

In the era of intensifying globalization of the 1990s and into the new millennium, market models of broadcasting generally emerged as dominant throughout the world, and a series of global mergers took place that consolidated media ownership into ever fewer hands. The result has been that a shrinking number of giant media corporations have controlled a widening range of media in corporate conglomerates that control the press, broadcasting, film, music, and other forms of popular entertainment, as well as the most accessed Internet sites. Media have been increasingly organized on a business model, and

competition between proliferating commercialized media have provided an impetus to replacing news with entertainment, to generate a tabloidization of news, and to pursue profits and sensationalism rather than public enlightenment and democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Many scholars have sketched out and criticized the consequences of media deregulation and the triumph of a market model for democracy over the past decades (see note 6). Expanded concentration of power in the hands of corporate groups who control powerful media conglomerates have in the view of many undermined democracy and indicate increasing corporate control of the media as a serious social problem. If corporate media promote their own interests and agendas, they do not serve their democratic purposes of informing the people, allowing the public to engage in informed civic debate, and thus to participate in democratic dialogue and decision-making. Moreover, if the media corporations utilize their powerful instruments of communication and information to advance their own corporate interests and those of politicians and policies that they favor, then the media have lost their democratic functions of serving to debate issues of socio-political interest and importance and to serve as a critical watchdog against excessive corporate government power and questionable policies. Moreover, the media do not address significant social problems if these issues threaten corporate power or dominant economic interests and by undermining democracy and not engaging the significant social problems of the era, the corporate media themselves become a social problem, requiring a democratic media politics.

In the view of many media critics, once the corporate media surrendered their responsibilities to serve the public and provide a forum for democratic debate and to address significant issues of common concern, they have largely promoted the growth of corporate and state power and undermined democracy. This results in the ignoring of crucial social problems by corporate media and the advancing of corporate agendas. For Jurgen Habermas, the problem was rooted in the transition from the liberal public sphere grounded in democratic public institutions to a corporate-controlled media of late capitalism.

For Habermas, during the era of the Enlightenment and 18th century democratic revolutions, public spheres emerged where individuals could discuss and debate issues of common concern. In his influential study The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989 [1962]), Habermas contrasted various forms of an active, participatory public sphere in the heroic era of liberal democracy with the more privatized forms of spectator politics in a bureaucratic industrial society in which the media and elites controlled the public sphere. The book delineates the historical genesis of the bourgeois public sphere, followed by an account of the structural change of the public sphere in the contemporary era with the rise of state capitalism, culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in public life. On this account, big economic and governmental organizations took over the public sphere, while citizens became content to become primarily consumers of goods, services, political administration, and spectacle.

The classical liberal public sphere was a location where criticism of the state and existing society could circulate. The institutions and sites of the 18th century democratic public sphere included newspapers, journals, and a press independent from state ownership

and control, coffee houses where individuals read newspapers and engaged in political discussion, literary salons where ideas and criticism were produced, and public assemblies which were the sites of political oratory and debate. During the 19th century, the working class developed its own oppositional public spheres in union halls, party cells and meeting places, saloons, and institutions of working class culture. With the rise of Social Democracy and other working class movements in Europe and the United States, an alternative press, radical cultural organizations, and the strike, sit-in, and political insurrection emerged as sites and forms of an oppositional public sphere.

Habermas describes a transition from the liberal public sphere which originated in the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions to a media-dominated public sphere in the current era of what he calls "welfare state capitalism and mass democracy." This historical transformation is grounded in Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry (1972), in which giant corporations have taken over the public sphere and transformed it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity. In this transformation, "public opinion" shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls and political and media elites. Rational debate and consensus have thus been replaced by managed discussion and manipulation by the machinations of advertising and political consulting agencies. As Habermas argued: "Publicity loses its critical function in favor of a staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one can not respond by arguing but only by identifying with them" (1989: 206).

For Habermas, the function of the media have thus been transformed from facilitating rational discourse and debate within the public sphere into shaping, constructing, and limiting public discourse to those themes validated and approved by media corporations. Hence, the interconnection between a sphere of public debate and individual participation has been fractured and transmuted into that of a realm of political information and spectacle, in which citizen-consumers ingest and absorb passively entertainment and information. "Citizens" thus become spectators of media presentations and discourse that mold public opinion, reducing consumer/citizens to objects of news, information, and political manipulation. In Habermas's words: "Inasmuch as the mass media today strip away the literary husks from the kind of bourgeois self-interpretation and utilize them as marketable forms for the public services provided in a culture of consumers, the original meaning is reversed (1989: 171).

Habermas has been criticized for idealizing the bourgeois public sphere and failing to articulate the important democratic functions of alternative public spheres organized by labor, oppositional political groups, women, and other forces not adequately represented in the liberal public sphere. Nonetheless, his concept of a public sphere can serve as a normative ideal of a space in which individuals can freely discuss issues of common concern and organize to implement reforms and social change. Moreover, it can function as a standpoint for critique that indicates dangers to democracy and the failure of the media to not address significant social problems, if they are indeed ignored.<sup>8</sup>

## Globalization and the Triumph of Corporate Media

Today's public spheres include the print and broadcast media, computer data bases, websites, and Internet discussion groups, utilized by social movements, local citizens organizations, subcultures, political interest groups, and individuals who use list-serves, weblogs, or other instruments to serve various political causes.<sup>9</sup> With the rise of contemporary media and computer society, it is through the print and broadcast media, computers, and various other technologies that political hegemony has been forged over the past two decades (Kellner, 1990, 1995, and 2003). During the past two decades the dominant media of information and communication have become largely "corporate media," first, because they are owned by big corporations like NBC/RCA/General Electric, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann, ABC/Disney, Sony, and AOL/Time Warner. Secondly, these media conglomerates express the corporate point of view and advance the agendas of the organizations that own them and the politicians who they support and in turn who pursue the interests of the media conglomerates in governmental institutions.

Within the past two decades, the most powerful corporate forces have tightened their control of both the state and the media in the interests of aggressively promoting a pro-business agenda at the expense of other social groups. The consequences of the triumph of neo-liberalism and its program of deregulation, tax breaks for the wealthy, military build-up, cut-back of social programs, and the widening of class divisions are increasingly evident as we enter a new millennium. As the new century unfolds, globalized societies confront the specter of ever-increasing corporate and military power, worsening social conditions for the vast majority, and sporadic mixtures of massive apathy and explosive conflict. In this conjuncture, the corporate media continue to play a major role in managing consumer demand, producing thought and behavior congruent with the system of corporate capitalism, and creating people's sense of political events and issues. Since the media continue to become an ever greater political power and social force, it is all the more important to carry out sustained theoretical reflections on the social functions and effects of the corporate media, analyzing their threats to democracy, and seeing the corporate media as a social problem.

The corporate media form a system and interact and overlap with each other.<sup>10</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, television networks in the United States amalgamated with other major sectors of the cultural industries and corporate capital, including mergers between CBS and Westinghouse; MCA and Seagram's; Time Warner and Turner Communications; ABC, Capital Cities, and Disney; and NBC, General Electric, and Microsoft. In 1999, CBS merged with the entertainment colossus Viacom in a \$38 billion megamerger. Dwarfing all previous information/entertainment corporation combinations, Time Warner and America On-Line (AOL) proposed a \$163.4 billion amalgamation in January 2000, which was approved a year later. This union brought together two huge corporations involved in TV, film, magazines, newspapers, books, information databases, computers, and other media, suggesting a coming synthesis of media and computer culture, of entertainment and information in a new infotainment society.

The fact that “new media” Internet service provider and portal AOL was the majority shareholder in the deal seemed to point to the triumph of the new online Internet culture over the old media culture. The merger itself called attention to escalating synergy among information and entertainment industries and old and new media in the form of the networked economy and cyberculture. Yet the dramatic decline in the AOL/Time Warner stock price and corporate battles for control of the giant corporation illustrated the tensions between old and new media and the instabilities and uncertainties at the heart of global capitalism (see Kellner, 2003).

In Europe also there have been frantic mergers of media corporations, the rise and decline of media giants like Vivendi and Bertelsmann, and the rise of new conglomerates to take the place of declining media empires. In France, the Dassault group, headed by a rightwing politician who controlled a media empire has taken over the weekly Express and 14 other acquisitions, while another French conservative group headed by Jean-Luc Lagardere, an associated of Jacques Chirac is France’s biggest publisher, controls the magazine market and is attempting to expand into telecommunications (Ramonet, 2002). In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi owns the three main private television channels and as prime minister now also controls state television, while in Spain the Prisa company controls major newspaper and other publications, as well as radio and television networks.

These amalgamations bring together corporations involved in TV, film, magazines, newspapers, books, information data bases, computers, and other media, suggesting a coming together of media and computer culture, of entertainment and information in a new networked and multimedia infotainment society. There have also been massive mergers in the telecommunications industry, as well as between cable and satellite industries with major entertainment and corporate conglomerates. By 2003, ten gigantic multinational corporations, including AOL Time Warner, Disney-ABC, General Electric-NBC, Viacom-CBS, News Corporation, Vivendi, Sony, Bertelsmann, AT&T, and Liberty Media controlled most of the production of information and entertainment throughout the globe.<sup>11</sup> The result is less competition and diversity, and more corporate control of newspapers and journalism, television, radio, film, and other media of information and entertainment.

The corporate media, communications, and information industries are frantically scrambling to provide delivery for a wealth of services. These will include increased Internet access, wireless cellular telephones, and satellite personal communication devices, which will facilitate video, film, entertainment, and information on demand, as well as Internet shopping and more unsavory services like pornography and gambling. Consequently, the fusions of the immense infotainment conglomerates disclose a synergy between information technologies and multimedia, which combine entertainment and information, undermining distinctions between these domains, and producing powerful new social forces.

The neoliberal deregulation agenda of the 1980s and 1990s attempted to remove all major structural constraints on the broadcasting business in terms of ownership, licenses, and business practices. Furthermore, it eliminated public service requirements and restraints on advertising and programming in many countries, thus allowing television networks, for instance, to increase advertising, cut back on documentaries and public service

programming, and to use children's programs to dramatize commercial toys, eliminating the regulation of children's television that restricted advertising and forbid children's shows based on commercial toys. Deregulation contributed massively to the concentration, conglomeratization, and commercialization of the mainstream media and to the collapse of the telecommunication industry that cost over half a million people their jobs in 2002 and contributed to around \$2 trillion of the \$7 trillion lost on the U.S. stock market the same year (see Starr, 2002).

Consequently, neoliberal deregulation of the media dramatically redefined the relationships between government and broadcasting and attempted to undo decades of regulatory guidelines and policies. As a result, during the past two decades, there has been a significant reduction of news, documentary, and public affairs broadcasting. The trend toward sensationalism has been intensified with "reality programming" (i.e. tabloid journalism of the sort found in the New York Daily News and Post, or British tabloids who obsess over scandals of leading politicians or the Royals). Tabloid journalism ranges from Geraldo Rivera's "exposés" of satanism and live drug busts, to the gruesome murder of the week, or series dedicated to tabloid-style crime and sex scandals.

In general, from the 1990s through the present political broadcast journalism thus turned toward a tabloid style journalism and away from analysis, criticism, and genuine investigative reporting that engaged social problems (see Kellner, 2003). Deregulation also led to dramatic conglomerate take-overs of radio stations and curtailment of radio news operations. In practice, this meant major curtailment of local news, thus depriving communities that did not have a local daily newspaper of news concerning their areas. Previously, it was radio that was the voice of these communities, but with the take-over of local radio stations by corporate conglomerates, local news and public affairs were often cut back significantly and even sometimes eliminated completely. During the 1990s and into the new millennium consolidation and commercialization of radio continued to intensify with a small number of firms buying up more and more local radio stations, imposing standardized Top 40 music formats and nationally-syndicated and mostly conservative Talk Radio shows. Moreover, 2002 Extra! Surveys indicate that National Public Radio continued to be dominated by white voices, while community radio was under attack from corporate and public radio take-over.<sup>12</sup>

Other studies during the first decade of broadcasting deregulation indicated an increased amount of commercial interruptions, dramatically deteriorating children's television, large cutbacks in news and public affairs programming, and a more conservative corporate climate at the networks where individuals feared for their jobs in a period of "bottom-line" corporate firing (see Kellner, 1990). Furthermore, rightwing pressure groups used a variety of strategies to push and keep network news coverage on the right track. For instance, the "Accuracy in Media" group carried out campaigns against programs with a perceived "liberal bias" and demanded, and sometimes received, free time to answer supposedly "liberal" programs. Lawsuits by General William Westmoreland against a CBS Vietnam documentary, and by Israeli General Ariel Sharon against Time magazine, discouraged the media from criticizing conservative politicians. Although Westmoreland and Sharon lost their cases, the lawsuits had a chilling effect on the media, constraining the

media against undertaking critical reporting against individuals, corporations, or groups who might sue them.<sup>13</sup>

During the Gulf War of 1991 and the Afghanistan war following the September 11 terror attacks, the broadcasting networks and press were subject to unprecedented pressure to conform to the views of the respective wars advanced by the Bush administration in question and the Pentagon (see Kellner, 1992 and forthcoming). This pool system that restricted access to the battlefield and that produced censorship of reporters' stories and images followed the British attempt to control news during the Falkland-Malvinas war in the early 1980s (Kellner, 1992). On this model, press pools sharply restrict access to the actual battlefields and the government and military do everything possible to control the flow of images, news, and information.

In addition during Gulf War I and the Afghanistan war, there were organized campaigns to mobilize audiences against networks or papers that criticized U.S. policy, that documented civilian casualties or that in any way was seen as aiding and abetting the enemy (Kellner, forthcoming). The result is that during war, the press and broadcasting institutions in the U.S. are little more than cheerleaders for the military effort and instruments of propaganda for the state. Moreover, not only are news programs slanted toward the hegemonic positions of corporate and government elites, but discussion shows also are dominated by conservative discourses. Although there has been a proliferation of television political discussion shows over the past decade with the rise of 24-hour cable news television, one wonders if the public interest is served by the composition of these corporate media talk shows, which almost always are limited to mainstream representatives of the two major political parties, or other white male, establishment figures.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, in the past twenty-five years, while there has been an increase in news and discussion programming, there has been less of the liberal and socially critical documentaries of the previous decades and the dominant political discourse has been largely conservative. The corporate media in the U.S. helped forge the conservative hegemony of the 1980s by going down "on bended knee" to the Reagan administration, failing to vigorously criticize its policies. The corporate media also actively promoted the Reagan program of tax breaks for the rich and corporations, deregulation, union-busting, a massive military build-up, chauvinistic patriotism, and aggressive foreign intervention (Hertsgaard 1988). There were limits, of course, beyond which the media did not allow the zealous Reaganites to tread and the Iran/Contra coverage forced extremists out of the administration, helped induce Reagan to negotiate an arms reduction treaty with Gorbachev, diminishing Cold War tensions, and created the climate for the flourishing of a more centrist, conservative politics which helped elect George Bush (Kellner, 1990).

During the first Bush administration, the mainstream media in the United States provided propaganda for Bush's military intervention, following a major trends of media support for U.S. military interventions and policies (see Parenti, 1986 and Herman-Chomsky, 1988). This trend was particularly striking in network coverage of the Panama Invasion and the 1990-1 Persian Gulf crisis and then war. Coverage of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and Bush's immediate dispatching of troops to Saudi Arabia made it appear natural

that only a military response to the Iraqi invasion was viable and tended to support Bush's military policy, making it appear that war in the Middle East was inevitable. The mainstream media helped promote the military solution through its framing of the crisis, its omissions, and via the ways that they were manipulated and controlled by the Bush administration and Pentagon to manufacture consent to its policies. This had global consequences since the U.S. media frames tended to dominate world media presentation of the crisis in the Gulf and especially the Gulf War (see Kellner 1992).

Moreover, the corporate media failed to vigorously debate the political, ecological, and human consequences of the Gulf War and whether such an adventure was really in the interests of the people of the United States. Instead, the major television networks generally presented every position and action by the Bush administration and its multinational coalition positively. There were few voices seen or heard on corporate television against the slaughter of tens of thousands of Iraqis, including many civilian deaths, or the destruction of the Iraqi economic infrastructure by coalition bombing. Even the slaughter of fleeing Iraqis, after they formally announced withdrawal from Kuwait and sought a cease fire in the United Nations, was ignored or quickly passed over by the television networks in favor of joyous images of the liberation of Kuwait, or a replay of alleged Iraqi atrocities against Kuwaitis. The issue of the Bush administration coalition's responsibility for much of the ecological crisis in the Gulf was not raised, even though part of the oil spills, some of the oil fires in Kuwait, and all of the ecological destruction in Iraq was caused by the U.S.-led coalition bombing (see Clark, 1992 and Kellner, 1992). Likewise, there was little coverage of the resulting mysterious diseases suffered by U.S. troops serving in the Gulf War, crippling and killing thousands from untested anthrax vaccines, exposure to depleted-uranium weapons, possible exposure to Iraqi chemical weapons, and to burning oil and other war-related pollution (see Hersh, 1998).

Thus during the crisis in the Gulf and the Gulf war of 1990-1, the corporate media advanced the agenda of the Bush Administration and the Pentagon, while failing to adequately inform the public or to debate the issues involved. Instead of serving as a forum for public debate, the corporate media served instead as a propaganda organ for the state, the military, and defense industries, contributing to a further centralization of state, corporate, and military power and growing manipulation and indoctrination of the public. On the whole, corporate-controlled media promote the interests of conservative parties and economic interests. Throughout the world the Rupert Murdoch owned News Corporation disseminated aggressively rightwing politics and in Italy media baron Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister with the aid of his media empire behind him, despite a series of business scandals that could have landed him in jail.

In general, the decline of documentaries, public affairs programming, and political discussion helped produce a less informed electorate, more susceptible to political manipulation. Democracy requires vigorous public debate of key issues of importance and an informed electorate, able to make intelligent decisions and to participate in politics. Corporate control of the media meant that corporations could use the media to aggressively promote their own interests and to cut back on the criticism of corporate abuses that was expanding from the 1970s to the present. The tabloidization of news and intense competition

between various media meant that the corporate media ignored social problems and focused on scandal and tabloid entertainment rather than issues of serious public concern.

During the Clinton era, consequently, the media focused intensely on the O.J. Simpson scandals in the mid-1990s and then turned toward the Clinton sex scandals. Although previously, corporate media tended to support presidents in office, and had been especially uncritical of the ruling administration in the Reagan and Bush I years, during the Clinton era the media became fierce watchdogs, pouncing on every potential scandal involving the Clintons and feasting on the sex scandals that eventually exploded and took over the media in the 1990s. This was an era of rightwing talk radio, the rise of conservative television networks like Fox, and the proliferation of the Internet, which had many anti-Clinton activists and gossips like Matt Drudge, whose website first broke the Bill and Monica story (see Kellner, 2003).

The 1990s was an era of escalating social problems caused by globalization and the abuses of corporate capitalism, key social problems like the environment and ecological problems, a crisis in public health, growing inequality between rich and poor, and dangerous corporate practices that would eventually explode in 2002. It was an era of neoliberalism in which not only were the media deregulated, but so too were corporate practices, financial markets, and the global economy. The media tended to celebrate the “new economy” and the period of economic boom and growing affluency, while overlooking the dangers of an overinflated stock market, an unregulated economy, and the growing divisions between haves and have nots. During this era, the corporate media thus neglected social problems in favor of celebrating the capitalist economy and technological revolution. The media also overlooked the growth of terrorism, dangerous consequences of the division between have and have-nots in the global economy, and growing ecological problems.

### The Internet and the Prospects for Democratic Media

The only way that a democratic social order can be maintained is for the mainstream media to assume their democratic functions of critically discussing all issues of public concern and social problems from a variety of viewpoints and fostering vigorous public debate. The democratic imperative that the press and broadcasting provide a variety of views on issues of public interest and controversy has been increasingly sacrificed, as has their responsibilities to serve as a check against excessive government or corporate power and corruption. As I have documented, many critics have argued that over the past decades a wide range of social problems have not been adequately addressed and that the corporate media themselves have become a major social problem that have blocked social progress while advancing the interests of corporate institutions and conservative politics. To remedy this situation, first of all there must be a revitalization of the media reform movement and recognition of the importance of media politics in the struggle for democratization and the creation of a just society, and support and development of alternative media.<sup>15</sup>

Democratizing the media system will require development of a vigorous reform movement and recognition for all progressive social movements of the importance of invigorating the media system for forward looking social change and addressing urgent

social problems and issues. This process will involve sustained critique of the corporate media, calls for reregulation, and the revitalization of public television, cultivation of community and public radio, improved public access television, an expansion of investigative and public service journalism, and full democratic utilization of the Internet. Since corporations control the mainstream press, broadcasting, and other major institutions of culture and communication, there is little hope that the corporate media will be democratized without major pressure or increased government regulation of a sort that is not on the horizon in the present moment in most parts of the world.

The Internet, by contrast, provides potential for a democratic revitalization of the media. The Internet makes accessible more information available to a greater number of people, more easily, and from a wider array of sources than any instrument of information and communication in history. It is constantly astonishing to discover the extensive array of material available, articulating every conceivable point of view and providing news, opinion, and sources of a striking variety and diversity. Moreover, the Internet allows two-way communication and democratic participation in public dialogue, activity that is essential to producing a vital democracy.

One of the major contradictions of the current era is that for the wired world at least, and increasingly the public at large, a total information environment is expanding, consisting of a broad spectrum of radio and television broadcasting networks; print media and publications; and the global village of the Internet, which itself contains the most varied and extensive sources of information and entertainment ever assembled in a single medium. The Internet can send disparate types and sources of information and images instantly throughout the world and is increasingly being used by a variety of oppositional groups (see Kellner 1999 and Best and Kellner 2001). Yet it is also true that thanks to media mergers of the past decade, fewer hands control the dominant media outlets, which can be utilized by powerful corporate and political interests for specific partisan ends, as I document in this study. To be sure, much of the world is not yet wired, many people do not even read, and different inhabitants in various parts of the globe receive their information and culture in very dissimilar ways through varying sources, media, and forms. Thus, the type and quality of information vary tremendously, depending on an individual's access and ability to properly interpret and contextualize it.

Democracy, however, requires informed citizens and access to information and thus the viability of democracy is dependent on citizens seeking out crucial information, having the ability to access and appraise it, and to engage in public conversations about issues of importance. Democratic media reform and alternative media are thus crucial to revitalizing and even preserving the democratic project in the face of powerful corporate and political forces. How media can be democratized and what alternative media can be developed will of course be different in various parts of the world, but without a democratic media politics and alternative media democracy itself cannot survive in a vigorous form, nor will a wide range of social problems be engaged or even addressed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For overviews of the literature on media effects, see Klapper, 1960 and McQuail, 1994. For a reader that presents cases for conflicting positions concerning positive and negative effects of a wide range of media, see Barbour, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent critique of the two-flow paradigm, see Gitlin, 1978.

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<sup>3</sup> See the studies depicting both sides of the debate on contemporary media and alleged harmful or beneficial effects in Barbour, 1994 and in Dines and Humez, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of studies of the politics of representation, see Gilroy, 1991; McRobbie, 1994; Ang, 1998, and texts collected in Durham and Kellner, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See the broad array of the pro and con perspectives on pornography in Dines and Humez, 2003).

6. See the discussion of the media and democracy in Kellner, 1990, Chapters 2 and 3; on the Federal Communications Act of 1934 and the battle for democratic media in the 1930s, see McChesney, 1993.

7. On media consolidation and its impact over the past two decades, see Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Bagdikian, 1997; Schiller, 1990; Kellner, 1990; and McChesney 2000.

<sup>8</sup> On the influence of Habermas's concept of the public sphere, see the studies in Calhoun, 1992 and Kellner, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> On new public spheres and technopolitics, see Kellner, 1999, Best and Kellner, 2001, and Kahn and Kellner, forthcoming.

10. See Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972) and the studies of the structure and impact of contemporary culture industry in McChesney, 2000 and Best and Kellner, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> See the charts on media mergers and concentration in Croteau and Hoynes 2001: 75ff. and in The Nation (Jan. 7, 2002) with analysis by Mark Crispin Miller, "What's Wrong with This Picture?"

12. See the reports "White Noise. Voices of color scarce on urban public radio" and "No Community Voices Wanted" Extra! (Sept.-Oct. 2002). William Safire in (2002) cites a Gannett report that indicates that in 1996 while the largest two radio chains owned 115 stations, by 2003 they owned more than 1,400; a handful of radio company owners used to generate only one-fifth of industry revenue, while today the top five take in 55% of all money spent on local radio and the number of station owners has plummeted by a third.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed study of the effects of deregulation on media culture in the 1990s, see McChesney, 2000.

14. A 2002 study carried out by a non-partisan German-based media analysis firm Media Tenor indicated that the three major U.S. network news operations at ABC, CBS, and NBC used news sources that were 92% white, 85% male, and, where party affiliation was identifiable 75% were Republican. Big business had 35 times more representatives than labor, Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Arab-Americans were almost invisible, "experts" came from primarily elite institutions and rarely non-governmental organizations, and the established political party and executive branch was strongly favored. FAIR, "Power Sources: On party, gender, race and class, TV news looks to the most powerful groups," Extra! (May/June 2002).

<sup>15</sup> For more detailed proposals for democratizing the media and producing alternative media and politics, see Kellner, 1990 and 1999; McChesney, 1997 and 2000; Best and

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Kellner, 2001, and Jeffrey Chester and Gary O. Larson, “A 12-Step Program for Media democracy,” The Nation (July 23, 2002).