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The Politics of News Media

Cover Page Footnote

Michael Parenti, author of fourteen books and many essays for a variety of newspapers and magazines, is considered one of the nation's leading progressive speakers. This talk was delivered at the Sixth Annual Media Studies Symposium at Sacred Heart University on March 26, 2000.

MICHAEL PARENTI

The Politics of News Media

There are two myths about the media that are deserving of challenge. One of them states that we have a free and independent press. That's a myth which the media themselves propagate. Unlike some countries in which the media are critical of U.S. foreign policy, critical of the U.S. national security state, critical of the CIA and therefore supposedly "ideologically motivated," our media are said to be "objective, free and independent" – which means that they pretty much accept what the national security state does in the world. They accept what the White House and other policymakers say, and they transmit these official views like obliging mouthpieces. That's called free and independent. The other myth is that we have a liberal press. I would argue that it's not really very liberal.

Let's take that second point first. The media, that is, the various mainstream newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV stations, are literally awash with conservative commentators who complain about not having enough exposure in the liberal media. I remember being on a panel with Reed Irvine of the organization, as he calls it, Accuracy in the Media. Reed Irvine is a conservative. I rather like him but I don't like his politics. He argued that the conservative view is shut out of the media. I said, "No, people who have a critical radical analysis, who strongly support labor, who strongly support ordinary working people, who support racial and gender equality, and who support the rights of working people of all ethnic backgrounds, those are the people who have a hard time getting exposure on the media. People who are critical of the power of big corporations: you don't hear them on mainstream media. And I turned to him and I said, "Reed, how can you say you are cut out _____"

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of the media, when you have a syndicated newspaper that's published in over a hundred newspapers, and a radio show that's on over a

hundred and fifty radio stations?" Indeed, a lot of us would like to be frozen out of the media that way.

Consider the "National Empowerment Television," NET, a cable network available in all fifty states. It offers round the clock right-wing political commentary. Newt Gingrich was a big hit on it. Its founder says that it is dedicated to countering the news media, because the news media is riddled with a far-left political bias and "unacceptable" notions about gender norming, racial quotas, global warming, and gays in the military. The network avoids dealing with issues like the tax favoritism shown to the rich, the huge waste and cost of our military budget, the devastation wrought upon the environment and the like. How were the people at NET able to form a whole rightist network dedicated to distracting us with gay bashing, sexism, racism, and bashing of environmentalists? a whole conservative network? Why don't people who have a more critical view form a network? The answer is that those who are critical of corporate America don't get the kind of money to form and to buy a network. So it gets down to the money power.

By complaining that it's a "liberal" media, the conservatives keep reporters and commentators leaning to the right to demonstrate that they are not favoring a liberal perspective. In fact, conservative commentators dominate the talk shows and actually dominate the media, getting most of the exposure because they get corporate backing and corporate funding.

Who owns the big media, the mass media? The press lords that come to mind are Hearst, Henry Luce, Rupert Murdoch, Sulzberger, and Annenberg. The thing they all have in common is that they are markedly conservative and they regularly leave their ideological imprint on both news and editorial content. Rupert Murdoch was once asked in an interview, "You're considered to be politically conservative. To what extent do you influence the editorial posture of your newspapers?" and I thought that he was going to answer with the usual blather, such as: "I respect the editorial independence of my editors, there's a professional standard," *et cetera*. In fact, he responded with refreshing candor. He said "I control them. Are you kidding? I exercise considerable control. My editors have input, but I make the final decisions." I thought, that's very refreshing and very honest to admit as much. When old man Sulzberger was running the *New York*

THE POLITICS OF NEWS MEDIA

3

Times, he would call up the editorials on his computer and even the front page that was going to run the next day, and he would check them all, and call for cuts or changes if he saw something he did not like. His son, who now runs the paper and is even more conservative than he, meets with the editors every single day to make sure they're not going astray.

The boards of directors of print and broadcast news organizations are literally populated with top officials and representatives from Ford, General Motors, General Electric, Dow Corning, Alcoa, Coca Cola, Philip Morris, ITT, IBM, AT&T, and all sorts of other giant corporations, a whole network of interlocking directorates that resembles the boards of other corporations. Among the major stockholders of the three largest broadcast networks are Chase Manhattan Bank, J.P. Morgan Bank, and Citibank. NBC is owned by General Electric, CBS is owned by Westinghouse, ABC is owned by Disney. General Electric and Disney are two of the most conservative corporations in America. It was General Electric that picked up Ronnie Reagan when his career had dribbled off into nothing, and gave him that *General Electric Hour* host spot, and then backed him for governor of California, and later for president. So the news media in America are not just close to corporate America; they are not just friendly to corporate America; they are an integral part of corporate America. And they are very profitable, by the way. There's another myth that these newspapers and broadcast outlets are struggling to survive. In fact, they're making immense amounts of money for their owners.

You might recall that in the 1996 presidential campaign the AFL-CIO announced that it would take a more active role in the campaign. The word was that "Big Labor" was going to spend \$43 million. My, did the media publicize that. After awhile it seemed that everybody was talking about labor's \$43 million. They ended up spending only \$25 million, actually. Well, let me tell you, my friends, I live in California. To defeat a single-payer health-care initiative, the big corporations in California spent over \$50 million. That's in one state. The big corporations in the state of Florida, to defeat the protection of the wetlands, just one proposition on the ballot, spent about \$40 million. If you want to see people spending money, look at what these companies do. Where do you think Al Gore and George W. Bush get

their money from? They get it from the people who have it. They don't get it from working people and independent donors, they get most of it from corporate America.

Not surprisingly, then, the concerns of labor are regularly downplayed. I'm a member of the National Writers Union. Its president, Jonathan Tasini, did a study of all the stories that dealt with workers' issues carried by ABC, NBC, and CBS, on the evening news during a one-year period. And he defined that rather broadly; he included questions about minimum wage and day-care. Even with that broad definition of "labor issues," it came to only 2.3% of the total coverage. No wonder that only 6% of big business leaders think that the media treatment accorded them is poor while 66% say that it is good or excellent.

Another influence besides direct ownership is corporate advertising. If you can buy a radio station, who's going to pay the bills? The advertisers do. Well, who has the money to advertise? Corporate advertisers exercise their own additional conservative influence on the media. They'll cancel accounts not only when a story reflects poorly on their product. More often than not, they will cancel accounts when they believe that the particular station or commentator or show is getting too liberal.

The religious media manifest the same imbalance. Most of you have heard of the Christian Right, but how many of you have heard of the Christian Left? Well, there happens to be a Christian Left, a very real, dedicated one. One of the Berrigan brothers just went to jail again with some others in a protest against a nuclear plant. But you don't hear about them because it's the Christian Right, the fundamentalist right-wing, featuring homophobic, sexist, reactionary televangelists like Pat Robertson who get the exposure because they own so much of the media. They comprise a \$3 billion a year industry and they control more than 10% of all radio stations and 14% of the nation's TV stations. The Christian Left has no radio stations or TV stations as far as I know. Again, it is because the Christian Left has no big bucks from the rich corporate class.

Then there is PBS, which is the publicly-funded network on TV, which some of us call the Petroleum Broadcasting System instead of the Public Broadcasting system, because 70% of all their prime-time shows are funded, wholly or in part, by four giant oil companies. PBS

THE POLITICS OF NEWS MEDIA

5

public affairs programs are underwritten by General Electric, General Motors, Metropolitan Life, Pepsico, Mobil, Paine-Webber, and others of the same ilk. Corporate representatives constitute 44% of the sources about the economy. Public interest activists and public interest critics account for only 3%, while labor representatives are virtually shut out. Generally the guests on NPR and PBS are about as ideologically conservative as any on the commercial networks.

This is not to say that there are not some liberal and really critical documentaries being made. But they don't get distributed. Capitalism will sell you the computer to write your book, and they will sell you the camera and the film to take to make your movie. Then the question you face — assuming you had enough funding to make the film — is how do you get it distributed? Even if your documentary gains a certain prominence: for instance *Deadly Deceptions*, which was a critique of General Electric and the nuclear arms industry, and *Panama Deception*, a revealing exposé of the U.S. invasion of Panama, both won Academy Awards. Yet neither got played on any commercial channel nor on the public ones. There were maybe one or two PBS stations in the whole country that played *Panama Deception*. I was especially partial to *Panama Deception* because I was in it, being interviewed for my critical comments of how the media gave the White House line. As far as I know, only KQED in the Bay area played *Panama Deception* a couple of times, and maybe one other station, maybe Boston, I'm not sure: there were rumors about that. In effect, both these excellent films were totally shut out, totally shut out because of the political information revealed in them about the national security state and U.S. foreign policy.

Look at the commentators; who do we have? Rush Limbaugh, McLaughlin: NBC has *The McLaughlin Group*, PBS has *One on One*, with McLaughlin as the host, cable NBC has the *McLaughlin Show*, with guess who? PBS's *Firing Line* has William Buckley. CNN used to have Evans and Novak; I don't know if they're still on, I don't think so. *This Week with David Brinkley*: these individuals are all conservatives. Michael Kinsley, when he used to be on *Crossfire*, with Pat Buchanan, summed it up very nicely when he said ``Buchanan is much farther to the right than I am to the left." And that's exactly the point: the spectrum you get is from far-right to centrist, moderate, and that's it. There's a whole left-liberal, progressive, radical part of the

political spectrum that is completely amputated and shut out of the major media, except for an occasional exception. I've been on *Crossfire* twice. I was once on with two conservatives screaming at me from each side. One of them was Robert Novak. I finally turned to him and said ``Are you going to let me finish a sentence or is this a screaming match we're in?" He said, ``I'll let you finish your sentence, but first we're going to have to break for a commercial." So even on the very rare occasions when dissidents get on the mainstream programs, they find they are not playing on a level playing field.

It is not surprising that on foreign affairs, for instance, the press's role as a cheerleader of the national security state and of free market capitalism is without restraint. Whether it is the Vietnam War, the invasions of Grenada and Panama, the Reagan intervention against Nicaragua, the Gulf War massacre, the sanctions against Libya, or the mass bombing of Yugoslavia, U.S. policy is always portrayed as arising from noble, if sometimes misplaced intentions. The media's view of the world is very much the same as the view from the State Department, the Pentagon, the CIA, and the White House. Now when you have media in some communist country where the media view is very much that of the government, we say it's totalitarian, it's not free and independent, not objective. But I'm saying that we have pretty much the same here. I don't have the time to document all that with case-study after case-study, but you are invited to look at some of my books on that subject, for instance, *Inventing Reality*, and more recently *Dirty Truths*, and *America Besieged*.

When considering how free and independent the U.S. mainstream media are, consider also the CIA. The CIA and other covert agencies have been involved in political assassinations, death squads that have killed tens of thousands of reform-minded political leaders, peasant organizers, student leaders, union leaders, socially-minded clergy, investigative journalists and others throughout the world. That story has never really been reported in the mainstream U.S. media. For half a century the CIA has been involved in drug trafficking, and in alliances with criminal elements in Corsica, Marseilles, and Sicily, to break Communist labor unions; allied with criminal elements in the Dominican Republic, Central America, South America, Indochina, and Afghanistan. Such involvement is a matter of public record. The Church Committee, Senator Kerry's committee, Congressman Pike's

THE POLITICS OF NEWS MEDIA

7

committee, all found this to be the case. There is a public record, a finding on the CIA's involvement in all of these things. It was a rational involvement: it gave the CIA a source of independent income; it gave individual enrichment to key operatives; it supported fascist gangs and warlords, anti-communists who did the dirty work, the murder assignments. It destroyed dissident organized communities among troublesome poor populations. And the media have consistently ignored or denied this story.

One of the interesting things about media personnel is the revolving door: you'll see people who, like Leslie Gelb, Ben Bradlee, most of the people who run the Copley outfit, Diane Sawyer, enjoy a kind of revolving door. Diane Sawyer started in the media, then worked for the Nixon Administration, and then she went over to CBS. Some of them might go work for some corporation for awhile. Pat Buchanan has spent almost his entire life working first in the Nixon administration, then in the media, then back in the Reagan administration, then again in the media. So in other words, he's never had an honest job in his life. Pete Williams was the shill for NBC during the Panama invasion. He is interviewed in *Panama Deception* saying "I don't know of any bombing of any working-class neighborhoods in Panama, I don't know of any of the people getting killed. No, none of that happened." A little while later Pete Williams turns up as NBC's national correspondent: he goes from the Pentagon to NBC. Now again I submit, if you saw that pattern in some countries, of somebody going from government to media and back to government and then to media, you would say that is totalitarian, that is not a free and independent press.

Senator Church discovered that every major news organization and outlet was penetrated by the CIA. Over 400 journalists, editors, and publishers were directly connected to the CIA. They gave a view of the world that fits with the view of the national security state and free market capitalism. Copley, Gannett, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the major networks, all had a number of CIA connections. That again is a matter of public record.

Such infiltration really slants the way issues are framed and reported. Take the whole controversy about Social Security. Social Security is a program that actually produces a \$40 or \$50 billion surplus every year. You tell me what other government program

produces that surplus. And it is targeted as being a program that is going to run into serious funding problems in about thirty-five years from now. Thirty-five years from now is totally off the map. The lawmakers cannot anticipate budgets a year or two from now, but they are talking about thirty-five years from now. And the calculations they are making about this futuristic bankruptcy of Social Security is based on an artificially slow growth economy. It's a rigged figure. The truth is, what corporate America doesn't like about Social Security is that it does work. It is not free market: nobody's making a profit on it. It actually collects capital, it gives services to people, it gives income to people who need it.

The media also fail to tell us that Social Security is a threefold program. It provides a retirement pension. It provides a survivor's insurance program: if the breadwinner in the family is killed, the children can get Social Security until they're eighteen. And it provides disability protection: if you suffer some serious disability, you can get Social Security, whether you're seventeen or seventy-five. And that program has been working and has been helping a lot of people. Those points are never mentioned. The whole argument about "the crisis in Social Security" is always framed in the media as "Will we have reforms or will we not?" The presumption is that the program is definitely in need of reform. Yes, it does need reform, but not in a regressive privatizing direction. It needs reform to give out better benefits in some cases, not to cut it back or subvert it through privatization and individual gambling on the stock market, as George W. Bush is proposing.

If you talk to reporters, you find they are of two kinds. There are those I've interviewed who will say "Oh, we are censored all the time. Are you kidding? Yes, we have to have finely tuned antenna to see just how far we can go up to that line. If a reporter crosses too many lines, it comes down from upstairs that he or she is getting too close to the story. So you've got to be careful. You can go just so far." The journalists who say things like that are usually ex-reporters, the ones who have left the profession disillusioned. The others, who have no conflicts with the need for self-censorship and do not believe it happens get very indignant if you suggest that they are reined in from time to time. They will say "Are you telling me that I'm controlled and manipulated? I'll have you know that in twenty-four years of

THE POLITICS OF NEWS MEDIA

9

writing for this newspaper, I have always said what I like." My answer to them is: "You say what you like because they like what you say. You remain within the circle of acceptable perspectives. Your views are totally congruent with those of the people who own or supervise or manage your particular medium." Think about it. You don't know you have a leash around your neck and that it is tied to a peg if you just sit by the peg. You don't feel a tug or restraint. It is only when you try to stray beyond a certain parameter that you feel the tug. So, there are people whose views are so totally congruent with those of the dominant political culture, of the dominant ownership of that particular organization, that of course they don't have any sensation of restraint or censorship.

Nicholas Johnson used to talk about the four stages of socialization that journalists go through. In the first stage, he writes an investigative story, he uncovers something. He gets very excited and brings the story to his editor, and the editor says, "No, that's too hot, we can't use it." In stage two, the reporter does not write the story, but he has the idea and he runs it past the editor who says, "No, that won't fly, no, that's too tricky, I think we've covered something like that." In stage three, the reporter gets the idea and he doesn't tell the editor; he just censors it himself and says "This won't work." And in stage four, he stops getting critical, investigative ideas. Then I would add a stage five: he gets on panels with media critics like me and becomes very indignant when we suggest the news is censored and manipulated, and he insists "I'm my own boss, nobody tells me what to write."

If the news is so preponderantly conservative, why do conservatives complain all the time that it is so liberal? I would say that the attacks from the right do help create a climate of opinion favorable to the right. They create a pressure from the right to keep the center of political gravity moving over to the right. Also, railing against the press's liberalism is a way of putting the press on the defensive and keeping it leaning rightward for its respectability. Third, a lot of right-wing ideologues find anything to the left of them to be liberal or leftist. The views may actually be rather conservative, but for them they are not conservative enough. So they find much on the air and in newspapers to be intolerable.

And finally there actually can be discordant elements in the media.

There are times when items come up that challenge the free market ideology. There are times when the media do report some things that put business in a bad light or the national security state in a bad light: inadvertently, not in any systematic, critical way of course. There might be a story on toxic waste dumping by industrial firms, about price gouging by defense contractors, about bodies piling up in Haiti, about financial fever on Wall Street, and these exposures are more than the rightists care to hear and are perceived by them as a vendetta by the "liberal" press.

Part of the conservative problem is that reality itself is radical. I mean, the Third World really is poor and oppressed, and has been economically raped and plundered. That is not some ideological thought, it is a reality. The U.S. usually does side with the Third World oligarchs and dictators. Our tax system really is regressive and favors the big corporations that pay relatively little in taxes, compared to the rest of us. Millions of Americans do live in poverty. The corporations do plunder and pollute the environment. Real wages for blue-collar workers definitely have declined in real buying power, and the very rich really are increasing their share of the pie. All those things are not liberal or leftist ideological rantings but a matter of public record, a reality. So reality is radical. And so you have a problem whenever some bits of reality sneak into the news media. It is at that point that the rightist watchdogs will argue that you are being liberal and you have a vendetta against big business.

People say, "Well, what do you have, a conspiracy theory? Do you think there are actually people at the top who are controlling and manipulating the information and news analysis that we get?" Yes, indeed I do. I definitely do think they control and manipulate information and opinion. I have seen it many times. The book I have just finished writing, entitled *To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia*, offers repeated instances of media fabrication and manipulation, with White House propaganda stories about mass atrocities for which no evidence materializes, contradictions in the stories that are put out, outright lies to justify a massive bombing attack on a country that has invaded no one, a country that once had a rather decent standard of living.

Then there is what I would call the "room phobia." People will repeatedly say, "Do you think there's a group of people who actually

THE POLITICS OF NEWS MEDIA

11

sit around in a room and plan these things?" And I always say, ``No, no, they don't sit around in a room, they meet on carousels, or on merry-go-rounds and they talk to each other, or they free fall, they sky-dive from parachutes. You've seen pictures of those groups up there, holding hands, and they start talking about controlling finance or raising the interest rate, or launching a military intervention against a reformist or revolutionary government." Of course they meet in rooms, where the hell else would do you think they meet? They have lots of rooms in the White House, they have lots of rooms in Langley, Virginia, lots of rooms at the Counsel for Foreign Relations, they have lots of rooms at the Tri-Lateral Commission, at the Bohemian Grove, the Bohemian Club, the Knickerbocker Club in New York. Nobody confabulates, nobody plans and talks about their vast concerns and enormous interests, like the ruling interests.

Do they consciously pursue those interests? Yes. And for some reason, whenever we suggest that the corporate-governmental-military elites consciously pursue certain goals, some people call that ``conspiracy theory." ``What?" they say, ``You think they actually think about these things ahead of time?" Well, are we to suppose that David Rockefeller gets up in the morning and says to himself, ``I guess I'll just float through the day. I own so much of the world, I won't even take a look at it." We ordinary folks are concerned about our interests. You make plans, you make calculations: should I get a part-time job when I go to school next year, where will I live, what about tuition costs, or whatever you plan about. School teachers get together and try to organize to defend their interests, farmers get together and try to organize in advance and defend their interests. But the minute we ascribe conscious organization and concern to the people who actually own most of the land, labor, capital, markets, and technology of this world (not just this country), someone will say, ``You have a conspiracy theory." The minute you ascribe conscious agency to the ruling elites, you are thought to have a conspiracy theory. It is a really interesting and rather predictable reaction. If you want to call that conspiracy, you can. I call it something else. I say they are defending their corporate interests and maximizing them at our expense.

Given all this, what is to be done? I would say, first, try to support alternative media whenever you can: small little community radio

stations, cable access, and the like. Try to give support to alternative publications, like *Dollars and Sense*, *Monthly Review*, *CovertAction Quarterly*, *People's Weekly World*, *Z Magazine*, *Multi-National Monitor*. Challenge the mainstream media: write letters, make telephone calls, send e-mail (which many of you love to do). They do read those letters, they do sometimes clean up their act on some little thing here or there: if you really hit them with something and point out a more blatant, obvious violation of the truth, they sometimes will smooth it over a bit (even when they don't print your letter). Call in on radio talk shows. Above all, educate, organize, and agitate, create an alternative political momentum.

Democracy does not work unless there is mass popular input, and there isn't mass popular input unless the mass of people can show their concerns for what it is they want and what they need. And that whole process of mobilizing mass sentiment to put pressure on officials and bureaucrats and leaders, that whole process is often short-circuited by media that may not always successfully manipulate us and tell us what to think, but certainly play a big role in telling us what to think about. The media too often predetermine the agenda and define the issues. They do not necessarily control every opinion, but they control opinion visibility.

You can see that verily so in the present-day election campaign. Recently I heard commentators on the radio saying, ``What was Bush doing in the South Carolina primary? Well, he's been more relaxed, he fixed his staff up, he did this, that, and the other thing. He's making an appeal here, and he's showing himself to be more confident. And he also seems to have a good rapport with his audiences, etc." What kind of commentary about a national election is that? These commentators have become theater critics. All they talk about here is the process, the style, the presentation, and the horse race. What they do not talk about is the issues.

Well, you can say, ``That's what the public wants." Certainly, people in the media insist that all they do is give the public what they want. Not true. Opinion polls show that the American public is not that happy with election campaigns. They complain about the negative ads. They complain about the immense amount of money that is spent on campaigns. Where is this money coming from? Who are these candidates beholden too after they get all this money? And finally, they

complain about the absence of issues, the absence of any talk about health-care, environmental protection, affordable housing, decent paying jobs with some economic security to them. They complain about the absence of any public discourse regarding worker rights, consumer protections, unfair tax distribution, biotech engineering of foods, and the like. Many even question the necessity of having U.S. forces spread all over the world, policing other lands and getting involved in bombing other countries and killing the citizens of those nations.

In other words, substantial segments of the public are not getting what they want in the way of intelligent public discussion of the vital issues that affect our lives. What we get is a contest between two multi-millionaires. Is that what we can call a democratic choice? One of them went to Harvard, the other went to Yale. What a choice! The father of one was a President of the United States, the other's father was a U.S. Senator. What a choice! One of them is a millionaire, and the other one is a multi-millionaire. What a choice! If you want to call that choice, you can go for it, but it's the Demicans versus the Republicrats, almost all of them beholden to big financial contributors, just as the media itself is.

So the model I'm proposing in contrast to that is people organizing, educating, agitating, challenging these major media – even in the limited ways available to us, building alternative media and an alternative political agenda, that whole process whereby people become the active social agents of their lives. George Bush the elder called that “class war” instigating the poor to hate the rich. I personally don't hate the rich – as people. Actually, I don't care about them one way or the other. I just don't want them on my neck. I don't want them running the country, manipulating our opinions, and treating our environment, our labor, our capital, as just so much raw material for their capital accumulation and their profits and more profits and more profits. That's what I don't want. Bush cries “class war” (as if he is crying “foul”) the minute we fight back, when in fact he is committing class war on our heads all the time.

The other thing you've got to do is *not* have faith in your leaders. I had a student say to me during the Gulf War, “Well, this is where you and I differ, you see. I have faith in President Bush. I trust him.” I said, “Excuse me? Are we doing religion here? You have faith in

President Bush, the way my Italian grandma had faith in St. Anthony? I mean, do you have a little picture of President Bush? You have a candle to George Bush? What are you talking about?" You say we have to trust our leaders? Trust? But I would say that trust is something you reserve for your loved ones or very close friends or relatives – and even then, check them out once in awhile! The essence of democracy is distrust: it is accountability, challenge, exposure, investigation. Democracy involves the open and critical clash of alternative views. That is when you have democracy. And if you want to call that class war, you can call it that. Indeed, class war is a real component. But I've got a better word for it: the word I have for it is ``democracy." Democracy, democracy, and let's have more of it.