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The 1997 Spry Memorial Lecture

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The Mythology of Commercial Broadcasting and the Contemporary Crisis of Public Broadcasting

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One of the most striking developments of the past decade has been the decline of public service broadcasting systems everywhere in the world. By public service broadcasting, I mean a system that is nonprofit and noncommercial, supported by public funds, ultimately accountable in some legally defined way to the citizenry, aimed at providing a service to the entire population, and one which does not apply commercial principles as the primary means to determine its programming.

Within these broad parameters, public service broadcasting may be democratic or bureaucratic, benevolent or banal. Where on the spectrum any particular public broadcasting system might fall depends largely upon two things: the level of democracy in the larger society, and the degree to which the system is the product of informed public debate. But today, all forms of public broadcasting -- and the democratic promise that is always implicit in public broadcasting systems -- are in rapid retreat. In my view, their very survival hangs in the balance.

To some extent, this decline is the result of the rise of the cable and satellite broadcasting technologies that have dramatically increased the number of television channels. When public broadcasting accounts for an ever smaller portion of the audience, it is ever more difficult to earn or maintain a public subsidy. To an even greater extent, however, the decline of public service broadcasting is the logical consequence of the worldwide neoliberal adoption of the market and commercial values as the superior regulator of the media -- and of all else. In this sense, the attack on public service broadcasting is part and parcel of the current attack on all non-commercial, public service institutions and values.

The decline of public service broadcasting can only be understood in this broader political

and economic context. Neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic principles; rather, it is implicitly a theory of democracy. And the democratic system that works best with a market-driven economy is one where there exists widespread public cynicism and depoliticization, and where the mainstream political parties barely debate the fundamental issues. Or, as the *Financial Times* has put it, the best political system is one in which the capitalist control of society is "depoliticised."

Of course, the most developed model of neoliberal "democracy" is the United States, with its minuscule voter turnouts and its legendary levels of political ignorance and apathy. This is a society where the lion's share of basic political decisions are made by the few for the few -- with massive public relations efforts generated to massage, and assuage, the public on those rare occasions when the rabble takes an active interest in public policy issues. And it is no coincidence that the United States has the most commercially marinated, corporate-dominated, profit-motivated media system in the world. Genuine public service broadcasting, unlike commercial media, will always be in conflict with the political culture preferred by the neoliberal order. Hence it is on the chopping block.

I believe that for those committed to actual participatory democracy -- as distinct from the sham neoliberal democracy -- it is crucial to protect and expand public service broadcasting as well as the broader sphere of nonprofit and noncommercial media. To do so requires that the very issue of broadcasting (and media) ownership and control be made a public issue, subject to examination and debate. The battle is for public broadcasting per se, not per quo. We need not only to get resources and institutional protection for public broadcasting; we need also to reform it mightily, so that it serves more directly as an agent of democracy, rather than of bureaucracy.

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The decline of public service broadcasting can only be understood in this broader political and economic context. Neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic principles; rather, it is implicitly a theory of democracy. And the democratic system that works best with a market-driven economy is one where there exists widespread public cynicism and depoliticization, and where the mainstream political parties barely debate the fundamental issues. Or, as the *Financial Times* has put it, the best political system is one in which the capitalist control of society is "depoliticised."

I also believe that the struggle on behalf of public service broadcasting needs to drop the pretense of being a politically neutral exercise and be honest with itself and the public. Meaningful broadcast and media reform cannot emerge in a neoliberal political environment. Media reform can only take place if it is part and parcel of broader social movements to

reform and democratize the whole of society. As a practical matter, media reform is not a particularly strong issue for organizing people; in order to make political sense, it must be linked to other issues. Because the commercial media system is so closely intertwined with the corporate political economy, one cannot help but challenge the broader political economy when one attacks the media status quo. Moreover, because the media system has become increasingly global in scope, political activism must likewise become transnational.

I will make my case in several stages.

1. First, I will provide a historical examination of the original movements for public service broadcasting, especially in the United States and Canada. I believe that these experiences, in particular, offer important lessons for media scholars and democratic media activists worldwide. In my discussion, the work and legacy of Graham Spry, in whose name I present this lecture, looms large. To the extent that public broadcasting has a distinguished past and exists at all in the present, it is indebted to people like Graham Spry, who struggled and organized to bring it into being. Of equal interest is how public broadcasting activists from Canada and the United States worked together, pointing toward the growing need today for international media activism.

2. In the second part of this paper, I will discuss the ongoing tension between public service broadcasting and the pressures of a capitalist political economy. In particular I will chronicle how whatever "balance" may have existed in the past has ended, and how the full weight of commercialism is now in the media's driver's seat. I will discuss the contours of the global media system -- where a handful of media conglomerates dominate television worldwide -- and the decline of public systems. I will also assess what the alternatives are today if existing public service broadcasting systems are to survive.

3. In the third section I will discuss the immense power of the modern corporate media system and the barriers it presents to public broadcasting and media reform activists. In addition to remarkable economic and political leverage, the giant media firms are protected by what is arguably the most sophisticated public relations apparatus in the world. I will discuss some of the myths and half-truths that protect corporate media power. In particular, I will focus on how the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has been appropriated over the past 30 years as a tool, both legal and ideological, for the commercial media and advertising interests. As a result, the First Amendment's connection to democracy is at times so faint as to scarcely exist at all. Nor is this a concern merely for those who live in the United States. This neoliberal First Amendment, if you will, underlies much of the thinking about commercial media implicit in global trade agreements like NAFTA and GATT. It states, in essence, *corporate media über alles*. In my view, this transformation of the First Amendment represents a grotesque, Orwellian twist by which the media system sanctifies outcomes more appropriate for a world led by the edicts of Goebbels than a world committed to the traditional canons of liberal democracy.

4. In the concluding section, I will present what I regard as the main tasks for public broadcasting and media activists. On the one hand, I argue that we need to reconceptualize public service broadcasting to take account of new technologies and

conditions. On the other hand, I argue that in many respects it still comes down to political organizing, and that this must be done locally, nationally, and globally. Aside from the sheer strength of the corporate media and neoliberal forces, the bad news is that too many communication scholars who should rightly be playing central roles in movements for democratic communication are oblivious to the task. They are constrained implicitly or explicitly by their connection to corporate media interests, and/or they are participants in the grotesque folly called "postmodernism." (To paraphrase an old bumper sticker, postmodernism is an intellectual process that converts energy and social commitment into solid waste.)

The good news, however, is that outside the academy there has been a global upsurge in media activism, and frequently it is closely attached to broader democratic movements that oppose neoliberalism. I will present and discuss some examples of this trend. In my view, the eventual survival and growth of public service media, and of a non-neoliberal notion of democracy, will ride on the success or failure of these emerging democratic political movements.

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The Historical Struggle for Public Service Broadcasting

In the neoliberal worldview, the view that dominates contemporary academic and elite discussions of public affairs, the central question concerning public service broadcasting is "Why should it exist at all?"

Given the assumption that the market is the superior mechanism for allocating goods and services, then the only justification for nonmarket broadcasting could be if, in the case of broadcasting, the market somehow failed to work its magic. Historically, the strongest defense of maintaining public broadcasting outside the market was that the radio spectrum only permitted a finite number of channels. Therefore, market competition was impossible, and it was better to have a public monopoly accountable to voters rather than a private one accountable only to the owners. Another important defense of nonprofit broadcasting was that it could fulfill those publicly necessary areas -- public affairs, educational material, children's fare -- that the market for whatever reason did not find lucrative.

With the technological explosion of the 1980s and 1990s, the conventional wisdom is that these defenses of public service broadcasting have collapsed. With the advent of digital broadcasting and the Internet, there clearly is no longer a great scarcity in channels. Likewise, with the plethora of channels available, there is now no reason that any area of interest cannot be met by a commercial system. Neoliberals argue that if there is any public demand for something in the current digital environment, it will show up on the Internet or elsewhere. There is no longer any need for the state to enter into the process. Accordingly, the neoliberals argue, whatever defense existed in the past for public broadcasting no longer exists. The system should be "zeroed out," at Newt Gingrich likes to put it. Indeed, to the neoliberals, any public subsidy of media is an unwarranted intrusion into the market that protects public broadcasting bureaucrats from desirable competition with the commercial broadcasters. In short, if one accepts the neoliberal assumptions, it is awfully difficult to make a case for public service broadcasting that is not patronizing, elitist, and possibly reactionary.

But, in fact, the neoliberal approach is an ass-backwards and self-serving way to phrase the question. It invariably points to private control, regardless of the social implications. It assumes away the very issues of ownership and subsidy, thereby reducing public debate over broadcasting to marginal, even trivial, issues. In fact, when boiled down, the neoliberal perspective on broadcasting has no place for public debate by citizens; rather, people can influence the outcome of the God-given market system only as investors or consumers.

The democratic approach, on the other hand, is to ask "What does society need to get from its broadcasting system? What values does it seek to preserve and promote? What are the technological and economic possibilities?" and finally, "What type of system will be most likely to fulfill these goals?"

In the democratic approach, the shape of broadcasting is a public issue to be determined through study and debate. From the democratic standpoint, a broadcasting system that is controlled by a handful of enormous private firms that make their money by selling advertising to other large private firms seems disconnected and irrelevant to the needs of a democratic society. One of the first critics of U.S. commercial broadcasting captured this sentiment perfectly in the 1930s:

> The present American system of broadcasting is an almost incredible absurdity for a country that stakes its existence upon universal suffrage, upon the general intelligence of its citizens, upon the spread of reliable information, upon the attitudes and judgments of all the people, and then consigns a means of general cormnunication exclusively to private interests, making public use for general welfare subordinate or incidental. The absurdity becomes more absurd when we deal with a limited resource belonging to all of us and save none of this general resource for our own general use. . . . The absurdity becomes tragic when the vital values of radio communication to a democracy are considered.

As this quote suggests, the notion that broadcasting was assumed to be a commercial enterprise from day one is simply not true. In fact, when radio broadcasting emerged in the 1920s, almost every nation considered its usage a political issue with distinct social implications. If we look at the relevant history of the rise of broadcasting, we can see how divorced from the actual record is the neoliberal notion that broadcasting is automatically, organically, and necessarily a profit-driven, commercial enterprise.

When radio broadcasting emerged in the years immediately following the First World War, it presented a distinct problem for the nations of the world. How was this revolutionary technology to be employed? Who would control radio broadcasting? Who would subsidize it? What was its fundamental purpose to be? The problem of broadcasting was especially pressing in North America and Western Europe, where the overwhelming majority of radio receivers were to be found until the 1940s and later. It was clear that national governments would play the central role in determining the manner in which broadcasting would be developed, if only because the radio spectrum was a limited resource which defied private appropriation. Beyond that, however, the matter was far from settled. In all the relevant countries, different interests made claims upon the new technology. They ranged from educators, labor, religious groups, political parties, amateur radio enthusiasts, listeners groups, and journalists to radio manufacturers, telephone and telegraph companies, naval and military interests, advertisers, electric utilities, and the commercial entertainment industry. Each group claimed, in various ways and to varying degree, to be the rightful steward of the nation's radio broadcasting service.

Accordingly, the outcome was different in every nation. Most strikingly, the United States and Great Britain -- two nations which had so much in common culturally, economically, and politically -- developed systems of broadcasting that were, in principle, diametrically opposed. The British established the British Broadcasting Corporation in the 1920s to serve as a nonprofit and noncommercial broadcasting monopoly. Under Lord John Reith, the BBC established the principles of what would become the paragon of public service broadcasting, although many other nations like Weimar Germany and the Netherlands created successful and quite different versions of public service broadcasting. The United States, on the other hand, adopted a system dominated by two networks, NBC and CBS, which were supported exclusively by commercial advertising. The hallmark of this system was its emphasis upon maximizing profit by any means necessary, which meant popular entertainment programming, usually provided by advertising agencies. These two systems, the British and the American, thereafter became the archetypes employed in virtually all discussions of broadcasting policy in democratic nations.

It was also during the 1920s and 1930s that vibrant political debates took place in all of these nations over how to best deploy broadcasting. The decisions made then would effectively direct the course of radio and television into the 1980s and 1990s. In Britain, for example, advertisers worked diligently in the early 1930s to have the BBC accept advertising. They were unable to generate even a minimum of public enthusiasm for commercial broadcasting. With the approval of the Ullswater Committee Report in 1936, the primacy of nonprofit and noncommercial broadcasting was established as non-negotiable for a generation. In the United States, the struggle over broadcasting was far more dramatic. By the time commercial broadcasting became established in the late 1920s, there arose a feisty movement to eliminate or markedly reduce for-profit, advertising-supported broadcasting and replace it with a nonprofit system operated on public service principles. With the passage of the Communications Act of 1934 and the creation of the Federal Communications Commission, this U.S. broadcast reform movement disintegrated, and the profit-motivated basis of U.S. broadcasting was politically inviolate forever after.

If the 1920s and 1930s, (specifically the years 1926-1935) form a critical juncture in the formation of national broadcasting systems, it was a critical juncture with a distinct

international edge quite unlike anything that had preceded it. Broadcasting was an international phenomenon that respected no political boundaries. Messages from one national broadcasting system often were audible in all surrounding nations. Broadcasting required international regulation to prevent neighboring nations from utilizing the same wavelengths and thereby jamming each others' signals. Finally, shortwave broadcasting, which emerged full force in the 1930s, was suitable only for international broadcasting; technologically it was ill-suited for domestic purposes except in enormous nations such as the Soviet Union. In short, the national debates over broadcasting occurred in an international context. It is not surprising, therefore, that U.S. commercial interests worked with their British counterparts in their efforts to commercialize the British airwaves. Similarly, advocates of public broadcasting worked as closely as possible with the BBC in their efforts to promote noncommercial broadcasting in the United States. During this formative period, the protagonists in the struggles for national systems of broadcasting recognized that it was being fought on a global playing field.

Nowhere was the international dimension of broadcast policymaking more apparent than in Canada. On the one hand, Canada had close political and cultural ties with both Britain and the BBC, where Gladstone Murray, a Canadian, emerged as a top executive. On the other hand, the preponderance of the Canadian population could pick up U.S. broadcasting stations on their radio receivers. This was the overwhelming fact of broadcasting as it emerged in Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, and the basis for Canada's profound political struggle to define a national broadcasting policy during these years. Not only did the United States play a critical role in the formation of Canadian policy, Canada also played an important role in this period in the fight for control of U.S. broadcasting.

"I have really come to feel," Spry wrote one Canadian editor, "that this is a struggle to control our own public opinion, and to keep it free from an American radio monopoly behind which stand General Electric, J. P. Morgan . . . Westinghouse, the motion picture and theatrical group, etc., in a word 'Capitaleesm' [sic] with a vengeance." In all of its communications, the Radio League emphasized what it regarded as the asinine character of U.S. commercial broadcasting. "At present, the advertisers pay the piper and call the tune," Spry declared. "And what a tune. The tune of North America is that of the peddler boosting his wares." . . . Still, the evidence suggests that Spry's enthusiasm for public service broadcasting was as much or more the consequence of his democratic socialism than it was the result of his Canadian nationalism. His primary concern, arguably, was that a commercial broadcasting system disenfranchised the public and empowered big business, regardless of nationality.

Radio broadcasting emerged in Canada in the 1920s much as it did in the United States. For most of the 1920s, nobody had a clue how to make any money from it. Broadcasting was taken up by various private groups, but it was not an engine of profit-making. In the United States, at mid-decade, almost one third of the stations were run by nonprofit groups, and

those stations operated by for-profit groups were intended to shed favorable publicity on the owner's primary enterprise, not generate profit. Indeed, the hallmark of both Canadian and U.S. broadcasting was its chaotic nature, which prevented long-term planning. (Indeed it was this chaos that influenced the British to formally adopt the BBC in the early 1920s, long before other nations had formalized their broadcast systems.) By 1928, however, U.S. capitalists began to sense the extraordinary commercial potential of broadcasting. With the support of the newly established Federal Radio Commission, the U.S. airwaves were effectively turned over to NBC and CBS and their advertisers. This transformation was staggering -- both in scope and the speed with which it took place. As Barnouw has noted, U.S. commercial broadcasting sprang from nonexistence to full maturity between 1928 and 1933. But this stunning event did not pass unnoticed. As mentioned above, the emergence of commercial broadcasting in the United States was met by a vociferous opposition that argued that commercial broadcasting was inimical to the communication requirements of a democratic society.

By the late 1920s, the Canadian public wanted to see broadcasting put on a more stable basis in order to assure receiving broadcasts over expensive receiving sets. The sudden rise of U.S. commercial broadcasting forced the hand of Canada, which either had to determine a distinct policy or see its radio broadcasting collapse into the orbit of NBC and CBS, both of which had already established affiliations with powerful stations in Montreal and Toronto. In December 1928, the Canadian government appointed a royal commission to make a thorough study of broadcasting and report to the House of Commons on the best system for Canada to adopt. The Aird Commission, named after its chairperson, held extensive public hearings across Canada. In addition, the commissioners spent four months in 1929 traveling in the United States, Britain, and other countries to examine other broadcasting systems. In New York, NBC executives candidly expressed their plans to incorporate Canada into their network. But the Aird Commission was most impressed by the nonprofit and noncommercial systems in Europe, and eventually recommended that Canada adopt a cross between the BBC and the German public service system, which (unlike the British) gave the provinces greater control over broadcasting. Commercial advertising would be severely restricted, perhaps even eliminated; the broadcasting service would be supported by license fees, as in Britain. The nationalist sentiment was unmistakable; as one Canadian newspaper put it, "The question to be decided by Canada is largely whether the Canadian people are to have Canadian independence in radio broadcasting or to become dependent upon sources in the United States." The BBC and the British press were delighted with the Aird Commission's report, regarding it as "a compliment to our BBC. system."

The Aird Commission Report did not settle matters for Canada, for its recommendations did not have the force of law. First, the Supreme Court of Canada had to rule that the national government and not the provincial governments had the right to regulate broadcasting. Second, the Supreme Court decision had to be upheld by the British Privy Council in London. Once this was accomplished, in February 1932, the Canadian House of Commons could then act upon the Aird Commission's recommendations. In the intervening three years, however, conditions had changed dramatically in Canada. The extraordinary growth of commercial broadcasting in the United States had made a profound impression upon Canadian advertisers and important elements of the business community. In particular, the Canadian Pacific Railroad developed a plan to provide for a private, national, advertising-supported broadcasting service for Canada, to be supervised by the railroad. It

began a campaign to coordinate the efforts of Canada's private broadcasters and advertisers to gain public support for the measure. Those elements supporting commercial broadcasting in Canada were allied with the U.S. commercial broadcasters and their Canadian subsidiaries. To some, it seemed that the momentum of the Aird Commission Report with its call for nonprofit, noncommercial broadcasting, had been lost amidst all the judicial haggling. Fears mounted that Canada might emulate the United States and adopt full-blown commercial broadcasting.

It was in this context that the Canadian Radio League was founded in 1930 by Graham Spry and Alan Plaunt, two young Canadians determined to have Canada adopt the system recommended in the Aird Report. The purpose of the Radio League was to mobilize support for public service broadcasting and to counter the campaign to bring commercial broadcasting to Canada. The Canadian Radio League emphasized how commercialism would undermine the democratic potential of broadcasting for Canada. "Democracy is by definition that system of Government responsible and controlled by public opinion. Radio broadcasting is palpably the most potent and significant agent for the formation of public opinion," Spry argued. "It is no more a business than the public school system." Spry detested the effect of advertising upon radio broadcasting. "To trust this weapon to advertising agents and interested corporations seems the uttermost folly." With these sentiments, Spry and the Canadian Radio League were in accord with the U.S. broadcast reform movement.

Most importantly, Spry and the Radio League emphasized the threat to Canadian culture and political autonomy posed by a commercial broadcasting system. Spry argued that such a system was suitable only for those Canadians "who believe that Canada has no spirit of her own, no character and soul to express and cultivate." The Radio League declared that U.S. commercial interests were working surreptitiously to undermine the consensus for public service broadcasting in Canada, and that the U.S. broadcasters were spreading lies and misinformation about both the Radio League and the BBC. "I have really come to feel," Spry wrote one Canadian editor, "that this is a struggle to control our own public opinion, and to keep it free from an American radio monopoly behind which stand General Electric, J. P. Morgan . . . Westinghouse, the motion picture and theatrical group, etc., in a word 'Capitaleesm' [sic] with a vengeance." In all of its communications, the Radio League emphasized what it regarded as the asinine character of U.S. commercial broadcasting. "At present, the advertisers pay the piper and call the tune," Spry declared. "And what a tune. The tune of North America is that of the peddler boosting his wares."

The Canadian Radio League was able to use this fear of U.S. commercial domination as a trump card in the Canadian deliberations over broadcasting. "The fact that the Radio Corporation of America and its associates are primarily American in their outlook colours our feelings," Spry wrote to one U.S. reformer. "We fear the monopoly not only as a monopoly, but as a foreign monopoly." Elements of the Canadian business community that might have opposed government broadcasting shared this concern that the United States might dominate a private Canadian system. There was the very real concern that well heeled U.S. advertisers could afford to purchase extensive radio advertising in Canada over a commercial system, and thus gain a competitive advantage over their smaller Canadian rivals. There was also the concern that if Canada permitted commercialism to continue, capitalists might use the few Canadian frequencies to broadcast commercial programming

into the heavily populated U.S. market, thereby turning their backs on Canada. "Indeed," Spry wrote to an American reformer, "if the fear of the United States did not exist, it would be necessary, like Voltaire's God, to invent it." Still, the evidence suggests that Spry's enthusiasm for public service broadcasting was as much or more the consequence of his democratic socialism than it was the result of his Canadian nationalism. His primary concern, arguably, was that a commercial broadcasting system disenfranchised the public and empowered big business, regardless of nationality.

In this light, it did not take very long for Spry and the Canadian Radio League to establish close relations with broadcast reformers in the United States. There, the leading reformers were journalists and civil libertarians, or were associated with various educational, labor, and religious groups. In fact, the reformers were a cross-section of U.S. society much like that enjoyed by the Canadian Radio League, though without the Radio League's business support. The U.S. reformers also lacked the Canadian Radio League's political savvy, and they could never agree upon one specific reform proposal and then coordinate their efforts to work for its passage. While the U.S. reformers never had great success generating mass support for reform, they played upon the intense dislike of American listeners for radio advertising in the early 1930s. The task for the reform movement was to convert this antipathy for radio advertising into support for reform. Early in 1931, the Canadian Radio League began a continual stream of communication with their American counterparts. As Spry wrote to one U.S. reformer, "Your approach to the question of the control of radio broadcasting is precisely my own."

When one considers the myriad broadcast and media channels now available, it seems plausible to argue that scarcity is no longer a viable rationale for the existence of public service broadcasting. But when one considers the monopolistic tendencies of this global market -- its hypercommercialism, its close link to the most powerful and wealthiest segments of society, and the nature of the content it generates -- the need for public service broadcasting (and media) seems more necessary than ever.

In the summer of 1931, Spry made an extended trip to the United States to meet with U.S. reformers. He was especially interested in getting any information on the U.S. broadcasting industry's activities in Canada. In Columbus, Ohio, he spoke about the Canadian situation to an enthusiastic audience at the annual convention of the Institute for Education by Radio. "Whatever the objective of commercial broadcasters in our country may be with reference to Canada," one U.S. activist informed Spry afterward, "I can assure you that the educators have no desire to interfere in any way with Canadian affairs. On the contrary, they are ready to cooperate in every possible way." For the next two years Spry and leading U.S. reformers stayed in constant contact. As Spry wrote one American, "If Canada establishes a non advertising system . . . your whole position in the United States will be enormously strengthened." Spry repeatedly emphasized the existence of the U.S. broadcast reform movement as discrediting the notion that commercial broadcasting was popularly embraced by listeners. "Opposition to this commercial force in the United States is equally strong," he told the House of Commons. And in a pamphlet, he wrote: "The cry for change is coming in

the United States. In Canada, it has decisively arrived."

The marriage of the Canadian Radio League and the U.S. broadcast reformers was abetted by their mutual hatred for the U.S. commercial broadcasting industry. Spry was convinced that NBC and CBS were working behind the scenes with the Canadian Pacific Railway to get a private system authorized by parliament. Spry believed there was tremendous incentive for the U.S. broadcasters to support a private system: once it was in place, NBC and CBS would affiliate with private broadcasters in all the other major Canadian markets besides Toronto and Montreal. When in Washington in 1931, Spry encountered NBC president Merlin Aylesworth, for whom he had considerable distaste. Before becoming president of the network, as director of the National Electric Light Association, Aylesworth had led the fight for privately owned utilities and had intervened in a particularly bitter fight in Ontario. Spry observed dryly, "Mr. Aylesworth has always been interested in Canada -- too much so from a Canadian point of view." At any rate, Spry recognized Aylesworth was a tough customer who left no doubt in that U.S. commercial broadcasters wanted access to the Canadian airwaves.

That belief notwithstanding, the actual evidence of U.S. commercial broadcasters' involvement in the Canadian radio debates is thin and patchy. Spry was quick to concede that the Americans used "quiet methods," and that much of their work was to dispatch eloquent speakers to Toronto and Montreal "to praise the American system and damn the British." (I can vouch for this. Having used the commercial broadcasters' records for this period extensively, this lack of a smoking gun comes as no surprise to me. Sensitive topics like these do not tend to make it into the corporate archives.) But circumstantial evidence does suggest considerable involvement by U.S. commercial interests. For example, the leader of the fight for commercial broadcasting in Canada, R. W. Ashcroft, was an advertising professional who had served as NBC's representative in Canada. The NBC and CBS affiliates in Toronto and Montreal sometimes carried programming highly critical of the BBC and all forms of broadcasting other than commercial. By then, the threat posed by the U.S. reformers, whether real or perceived, had become an obsession among the U.S. commercial broadcasters, and they were determined to win at any cost. Hence the broadcast reformers, American and Canadian, were of no mind to grant the U.S. commercial broadcasters the benefit of the doubt. As *The New Republic* editorialized at the time: "It is bad enough that we should permit a medium which clearly should have been devoted to the finest human arts to be degraded for the distribution of soap and toothpaste. It is far worse that our radio capitalists should exert pressure, thru the air, upon the opinion of a neighboring country, in an attempt to enforce our own dull, merchandizing spirit upon it."

If the U.S. commercial system served as one reference point for the Canadian debates, the BBC served as the other. By the early 1930s, the BBC was widely admired the world over, in a manner that had eluded NBC and CBS. The BBC was held up by the Canadian Radio League as the ideal to which Canadian broadcasting should aspire. When Canadian Prime Minister R. B. Bennett went to London in 1930, Spry used all his contacts to ensure that Bennett visited the BBC headquarters; he was convinced that if the conservative Bennett saw the BBC operation, he would forever oppose the move to commercial broadcasting in Canada. (Although it is unclear whether Bennett's London trip turned the tide, he did indeed support the nationalization of Canadian broadcasting.) There was also an element of imperial rivalry between Britain and the United States with regard to the path of Canadian

broadcasting. The explicit goal of the dominant U.S. communication firms since the First World War had been to reduce, if not actually eliminate, the presence of the British in the Western hemisphere. In this contest, the Canadian sympathies tended toward the British, a fact which the Radio League played upon.

At any rate, in order for the proponents of commercial broadcasting in Canada to succeed, they needed to deflate the exalted image of the BBC. This they did, with relish. As Canadian reformer Brooke Claxton wrote to Gladstone Murray of the BBC, "The private companies get out the wildest kind of propaganda about the BBC." The attack on the BBC reached its height in 1931 when John Gibbon, the publicity director of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the group leading the fight for a commercial system, published a scathing critique of the BBC in the Canadian Forum. Gibbon wrote that the weak performance of the BBC, combined with the popularity of U.S. commercial programs, made it absurd for Canada to proceed with the recommendations of the Aird Commission. Instead, he argued, only an advertising-supported system would give Canadians the type of programming they wanted.

The Canadian Radio League immediately sent a copy of Gibbon's article to the BBC, which was so irate it threatened to take the matter to the British House of Commons. Eventually, the Canadian Pacific Railway apologized to the BBC for the factual errors contained in the article, and Gibbon was severely reprimanded by his employer. In addition, the Canadian Forum permitted Spry to write a response to Gibbon, in which he decisively countered the attacks on both the Radio League and the BBC. In sum, this attempt to soil the BBC and the notion of public service broadcasting backfired.

In the spring of 1932, the Canadian House of Commons held extensive and widely publicized hearings on the recommendations of the Aird Commission. The U.S. broadcasting trade publication *Broadcasting* anticipated vindication for commercialism: "Most of Canada's citizens are accustomed to broadcasting by the American Plan and many will accept no substitute." But Sir John Aird testified to the contrary: "The broadcasting medium in Canada should be protected from being reduced to the level of commercial exploitation as it had been reduced in a neighboring country." Graham Spry coordinated the testimony of those endorsing the Aird report. "The choice before the committee is clear," he testified. "It is a choice between commercial interests and the people's interest. It is a choice between the state and the United States." Spry also emphasized that unless Canada established a national public broadcasting system, it would be unable to claim its fair percentage of the world's radio frequencies at a forthcoming international radio conference to be held in Madrid.

The United States loomed large in these Canadian debates. The House of Commons requested that NBC president Merlin Aylesworth testify in Ottawa regarding NBC's plans for Canada. Aylesworth declined. Privately, he wrote RCA president David Sarnoff, saying that to testify would be a "great mistake" on his part: "it would draw the fire up there and down here." U.S. reformers showed no such hesitation. U.S. radio inventor Lee De Forest submitted a statement on broadcasting to the Canadian House of Commons. De Forest's hatred of radio advertising was so intense he spent a year in the early 1930s attempting to invent a device that would automatically mute radio advertisements and then return the volume to audible levels when the programming returned. (Parenthetically, one can only speculate on the course of U.S. and global broadcasting had De Forest been successful in these experiments!) After lambasting U.S. radio for its "moronic fare," De Forest called upon

"you in Canada to lead radio in North America out of the morass in which it has pitiably sunk."

Most damning was the testimony of U.S. educator Joy Elmer Morgan, the only American to travel to Ottawa to testify in person. Morgan emphasized that commercial broadcasting had relegated public affairs and education to the margins and that the existence of the U.S. broadcast reform movement was "inescapable evidence of dissatisfaction" with the status quo. Morgan emphasized the importance of the Canadian hearings: "The important thing is not that a few people shall make money out of radio broadcasting, but rather that this new tool shall be used to beautify and to enrich human life. Now is the time to take a long look ahead to avoid mistakes which it would take decades or even centuries to correct."

Not surprisingly, Graham Spry was ecstatic about the effect of Morgan's testimony. "Until your appearance," he wrote Morgan, "the committee had regarded the American situation as largely satisfactory and . . . educational broadcasts were eminently possible through commercial stations. . . . Your evidence gave an entirely new complexion to the situation and we are entirely grateful to you for your assistance." The recommendations of the Air Commission carried the day. At the completion of the hearings, the Canadian parliament approved the complete nationalization of broadcasting with the elimination of direct advertising.

The activities of the Canadian and U.S. broadcasting reformers of the early 1930s are of interest not only because of their clear historical importance in understanding the development of each nation's broadcasting system. In the work and writings of Spry, Morgan, John Dewey, and many others from the era like Charles Siepmann and James Rorty, we have the contours of a sophisticated critique of commercial broadcasting, a critique which in certain respects is every bit as valid today as it was then. It is a *political* critique which places the fight for public service broadcasting necessarily in the broader context of the fight for a more social democratic, even democratic socialist, society. These activists also recognized from the very beginning that theirs was a political struggle with clear global dimensions. The work of this first generation of public broadcasting activists is a continual reminder that control over broadcasting (and communication) must always be the duty of the citizenry in a democratic society; it should never, ever be entrusted to the tender mercies of corporate and commercial interests. To the extent that the aims of these activists were thwarted, or have subsequently been thwarted, it was never the result of an informed public debate on broadcasting issues. To the contrary, it was the result of powerful commercial forces getting their way, often by circumventing or undermining the possibility of such a debate.

The formal approval of nationalization elated the U.S. reformers. On one hand, those Americans living near the Canadian border -- a not inconsiderable number -- would now be able to hear quality noncommercial programming. Spry emphasized this point in his own

testimony to the House of Commons: "A Canadian non-commercial chain . . . would seriously weaken the whole advertising basis of American broadcasting. If, for example, the Canadian chain offered two hours of the best possible jazz programs over high-powered Canadian stations which, at night, would invariably cover a large area of the United States, would not every listener, (Canadian and American) tune in on Canadian non-advertising programs, in preference to eight 15 minute American advertising programs, in which there would be 16 advertising speeches occupying from 7 to 25 per cent of the time? Would not Canadians, would not Americans, prefer programs without advertising to programs advertising corn cures, cigarettes, beauty aids, mouth washes? The answer is self-evident." Defenders of U.S. commercial broadcasting envisioned this same scenario, though they viewed it with alarm, not elation. "The existence and development of this Government-owned system will be a challenge to American radio station owners," one U.S. senator who favored commercialism stated. "They must prove themselves more satisfactory to the people than the Canadian system, or the Government system will inevitably be established in the United States."

In addition, the Canadian Radio League was seen by U.S. reformers as providing the model for how the reform effort should be organized in the United States. Morgan wrote to the Canadian Radio League, "We in the United States who are working for radio reform have been greatly encouraged by your success." The inability of the U.S. reformers to coalesce had been a major weakness for the Americans, especially when confronted by a powerful adversary like the commercial broadcasting lobby, which had immense power on Capitol Hill. Unfortunately, however, the Canadian model never became more than that for the U.S. reformers.

The nationalization of Canadian radio also led in the fall of 1932 to a major tactical reversal for the U.S. reform movement. Rather than lobby for specific measures -- for example, reserving 15 or 25 percent of the frequencies for non-profit broadcasting -- the U.S. reformers began to lobby for Congress to authorize a full-blown investigation for broadcasting, much like the Aird Commission, which would then recommend a wholly new manner of organizing U.S. broadcasting. The reformers considered it axiomatic that any neutral audit of broadcasting, conducted by people with the material link to commercial broadcasting, could only recommend nonprofit broadcasting, as in Canada. However, they never had a chance to see this belief tested. The commercial broadcasting lobby flexed its muscles to undercut the momentum for reform on Capitol Hill and all but eliminate congressional hearings on broadcast legislation. With the passage of the Communications Act of 1934, broadcast structure was no longer a legitimate political issue, and the commercial basis of the industry became politically sacrosanct.

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The Current Crisis of Public Service Broadcasting

Despite the accomplishments of Graham Spry and countless others to establish public service broadcasting systems in the formative years of radio (and television as well), public broadcasting has been locked in an almost continuous fight to maintain its social position, if not its survival. At times, in view of the strength and popularity of the broadcasting systems and the general strength of social democratic movements, in some nations public broadcasting appeared virtually unchallengeable as a social institution. But that strength rested on a social space allocated by delicate political, economic, and technological factors -- a space that barely exists anywhere in the world today.

A public broadcasting system is by definition an institution that invites controversy. How to provide a viable service -- however defined -- to the entire population is no simple matter, especially in societies marked by ethnic and cultural diversity, and with adversarial social movements representing conflicting political and social agendas. How public broadcasting can reflect the informed consent of the citizenry while still exercising a degree of editorial and cultural independence from the state or some other authority is likewise an ongoing problem. Yet these are all issues that can be debated, discussed, and, under the best of circumstances, resolved in some acceptable, if not ideal, manner. On their own, these issues should not be sufficient to derail an entire public broadcasting program.

Unfortunately, one central and arguably fatal core problem exists for public broadcasting: how to coexist with a capitalist political economy. To some extent this problem is similar to the tension between participatory democracy and capitalism. Democracy works best with minimal social inequality and when people regard the common good as important to their own well being. But these are two traits the market strongly discourages. As a rule of thumb, the more egalitarian a capitalist society, the more responsive and viable its public broadcasting system.

But there are distinct limits on how egalitarian and democratic any capitalist society will allow itself to be. No matter how liberal the rules or how lax their enforcement, there are rules, limitations, and sanctions. Even the best-intentioned and best-established public broadcasting systems find navigating the waters of a class society a tricky proposition, especially as the political system that formally controls them is unduly influenced by a wealthy ruling class in a capitalist society. Indeed, openly antagonizing the powers-that-be often produces swift and severe retribution. Hence, many public broadcasting systems either become extremely careful about upsetting those in economic and political power, or else keep criticism within relatively narrow boundaries. Sometimes this de facto self-censorship

becomes so pervasive that the broadcasting system virtually abandons its commitment to a democratic system. Sometimes it actually becomes anti-democratic. Moreover, public broadcasting systems build up a bureaucratic "armor" to protect themselves from interference from the powerful, and from the public at large. This is an understandable but problematic exercise. At its worst -- as in the case of, say, India's Doordarshan -- the public system loses public support and public confidence, thereby playing directly into the hands of those who do not oppose public broadcasting per quo but oppose it per se.

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In much the same way, the political right and neoliberal pro-capitalist forces always remain skeptical of public service broadcasting. They sometimes lead movements to crush it, as we have recently seen in the United States. Through experience, pro-market forces have learned that a commercial media system, especially one highly concentrated in the hands of a small number of corporations and subsidized largely by advertising, implicitly establishes boundaries on the content and nature of commercial media news, public affairs and entertainment. It almost automatically produces programming that accepts the status quo as essentially proper and benevolent. Even a well-disciplined public broadcasting system always contains the threat of approaching and examining the sorts of anti-business and anti-market issues that are marginalized, trivialized, or ignored by commercial systems. (For this same reason, the right crusades against "liberal" journalism in the United States. Its aim is to reduce or eliminate the professional autonomy of journalism, with its commitment to public service over commercialism, that conferred a degree of independence from the views and needs of owners and advertisers.) In a sense, it does not matter whether the right is successful or unsuccessful in bringing public broadcasting to heel, because, in the United States at any rate, the neoliberal center understands that in principle public broadcasting is and always will be its enemy.

But this conflict with capitalism is not merely implicit. Public broadcasting systems also face a direct and constant threat from capitalist forces that seek to exploit the commercial potential of broadcasting, and who regard public broadcasters as a barrier to their ambitions. This tendency is unavoidable. It stems out of the relentless pursuit of profit that is the hallmark of all capitalist economies. The trajectory is clear across the world: wherever public service principles are dominant, they eventually succumb to pressure to convert the broadcasting system to a largely commercial basis. And this always entails disastrous consequences for the nature of public broadcasting.

In the United States, this matter was settled in the mid-1930s. The record is plain to see. The

defeat of the broadcast reform movement in 1934 led to a Dark Ages for U.S. public broadcasting. Prior to 1934, reformers had sought a system in which the dominant sector was nonprofit and noncommercial. From that point forward, advocates of public broadcasting had to accept that the system was established primarily to benefit commercial broadcasting, and that public stations would have to find a niche on the margins, where they would not threaten the profitability of the commercial interests.

This made public broadcasting in the U.S. fundamentally different from Britain or Canada or nearly any other nation with a comparable political economy. Whereas the BBC and the CBC regarded their mandate as providing a service to the entire nation, U.S. public broadcasters realized that they could only survive politically by not taking listeners or viewers away from the commercial networks. The function of the public or educational broadcasters, then, was to provide that programming that was unprofitable for the commercial broadcasters to produce.

At the same time, however, politicians and government officials hostile to public broadcasting have long insisted that public broadcasting remain within the same ideological confines as the commercial system. After 1935, this encouraged U.S. public broadcasting to emphasize elite cultural programming at the expense of generating a large following. It seems fair to say that the vast majority of Americans did not even know that public broadcasting existed. In short, public broadcasting in the United States has been in a no-win situation since 1935.

Even with all these limitations, however, the commercial broadcasters remained wary of public broadcasting and fought it tooth and nail well into the 1960s. It was not until 1967, after many halting starts, that Congress passed the Public Broadcasting Act, which led to the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and soon thereafter to PBS and NPR. The commercial broadcasters finally agreed not to oppose public broadcasting, primarily because they believed the new public system could be responsible for doing the unprofitable cultural and public affairs programming that critics were constantly lambasting them for neglecting.

There was a catch, however. The new public system was given a Byzantine organizational structure that made planning quite difficult. More troubling, the initial plan to have the CPB funded by a tax on receivers -- similar to the BBC method -- was dropped. Thus, public broadcasting was deprived of a stable source of income that was vital for planning as well as editorial autonomy. From the outset, it was determined that we would have a public system, but it would be severely handicapped.

In Canada, public service broadcasting was victorious in the early 1930s, so it started on much firmer terrain. But the eventual development of public service broadcasting in Canada necessarily provide the alternative to commercial broadcasting for which Graham Spry and the U.S. reformers had hoped. Although a large public network was established, and eventually became the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, there was insufficient capital to proceed with complete nationalization. Therefore an independent group of private, advertising-supported stations remained in existence. Over time, the power of these stations *vis-a-vis* the CBC grew enormously. Spry became a sharp critic of the manner in which the CBC developed, characterizing it as a largely undemocratic bureaucracy by 1935. Spry's

vision for public service broadcasting was one which provided ample entertainment along with public affairs programming, but did so with a minimum of advertising. He was innately suspicious of permitting the profit motive to play a determining role in broadcast decision-making. In the late 1950s, Spry returned to his concerns with Canadian broadcasting after 25 years of work in politics and business. He established the Canadian Broadcasting League to reassert the primacy of public service principles over commercialism -- especially U.S. commercialism -- in Canadian radio and television. Although somewhat successful, the Canadian Broadcasting League was unable to stem the tide of commercialism in Canada.

This does not mean that the activities of the Canadian Radio League were a failure and that the creation of the CBC was of no lasting value. To the contrary, even by the middle 1930s, the U.S. entertainment publication *Variety* acknowledged that the Canadian system was capturing a more sophisticated audience. The Canadian system was markedly different than that in the United States. It carried far less advertising and granted far more room for liberal and left-wing political ideas to circulate. Over the long haul, however, commercial interests were able to circumvent the parliamentary intent of 1932 and, over time, they were able to reestablish their primacy in Canadian radio and television.

In Britain, public service broadcasting had the strongest hold by far. The BBC enjoyed a complete monopoly from the 1920s until the 1950s. It also enjoyed significant popular support. Even after commercial radio and television were introduced, the system managed to maintain its overriding commitment to public service for decades. This was due to no small extent to a regulatory regime that made it difficult for the commercial broadcasters to become entrenched and which required that they meet high standards for public service. In short, commercial principles were kept on a short leash and were not permitted to set the rules for the entire system. Indeed, the British experience suggests that a mixed system of public and commercial broadcasting can coexist and prosper (and even perhaps be desirable) if there is rigorous regulation to ensure public service values. But this is a difficult balance to strike; in Britain the incessant prodding of commercial interests, combined with the Thatcherite love of the market, helped turn the tide. By the 1990s British media scholar Colin Sparks announced that British broadcasting was a predominately commercial affair, and that the BBC was taking rather than giving cues.

What happened in Britain, in fact, represents the attack on whatever space has existed for public service broadcasting, even under the best of circumstances. The process is not simply a reflection of the crude neoliberal theology that guides so much policy-making, economics, communication, and so on. It also reflects the emergence, for the first time, of a global commercial media market dominated by a handful of enormous (and enormously powerful) transnational corporations. And these firms have earmarked global television as the very special fiefdom where they can spin their wares into gold. Public service broadcasting now faces a direct challenge quite unlike anything it has known before. Moreover, the interests of these corporate broadcast and media interests are aggressively represented by the U.S. government (among others) in international trade and copyright acts. The entire commercialization of media into a single global market appears to be the aim of the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, and for very good reasons. It is difficult to imagine a viable integrated global capitalist economy without having a global commercial media (and telecommunications) market.

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What is emerging is a fundamentally different media system across the world. Until quite recently, media was largely a national phenomenon -- the U.S. media, the British media, and so on. But today, following an unprecedented wave of mergers and acquisitions globally and in national markets, a global oligopolistic market covering the spectrum of media is crystallizing. There are very high barriers to entry. National markets remain, and they are indispensable for understanding any particular national situation, but they are becoming secondary in importance. The global media market is dominated by a first tier of nine enormous media conglomerates: Disney , Time-Warner , Bertelsmann , Viacom , News Corporation , TCI , Sony , General Electric (owner of NBC), and Seagram (owner of Universal).

These firms have holdings in several media sectors, and they operate in every corner of the world. Their annual sales in 1997 range from around $10 billion to $25 billion, placing most of them among the world's few hundred largest firms. Firms like Disney and Time-Warner have seen their non-U.S. revenues climb from around 15 percent in 1990 to 30 percent in 1996. Early in the next decade, both firms expect to earn a majority of the income outside of the United States. There is a second tier of another 40 or so media firms that round out the global media system. Most of these firms are from western Europe or North America, but a handful are from Asia and Latin America. They tend to have strong regional and niche markets and annual sales ranging from $1 billion to $5 billion.

This newly emerging global media market is obliterating some aspects of the old notions of "media" or "cultural" imperialism. National identities are blurred. For example, three of the biggest U.S.-based firms are owned respectively by Australia's News Corporation, by Sony of Japan, and Seagram of Canadian Seagram. The leading commercial media firms in the balance of the world, like Brazil's Globo or Mexico's Televisa, are all lining up with the

global giants, hoping to establish joint ventures and strategic alliances of one sort or another. The overall logic is less one of the U.S.A. versus other nations than it is corporate commercialism versus all other systems -- or (dare I say it?) of capitalism versus democracy.

A global commercial media system is not entirely new. For much of this century, the export markets for movies, television, music, and books have been dominated by Western, usually U.S.-based, firms. But the infrastructure of national media systems -- radio, television, newspapers, and periodicals -- tended to remain nationally-owned and controlled. The main development of the 1990s has been the rapid rise of a global commercial television system dominated almost exclusively by the world's 50 largest media firms.

What stimulates much of the creation of a global media market is the growth of commercial advertising worldwide, especially by transnational firms. Advertising tends to be conducted by large firms operating in oligopolistic markets. With the increasing globalization of the world economy, advertising has come to play a crucial role for the few hundred firms that dominate it. In 1995, for example, the eight largest advertisers spent nearly $25 billion of the $300 billion or so spent on advertising globally. The spending on advertising per capita is increasing at a rate well above GDP growth rates almost everywhere in the world. From this vantage point it becomes clear, also, how closely linked the U.S. and global media systems are to the market economy. Moreover, the global advertising agency market has undergone a wave of consolidation every bit as striking as that in the media industry. In the late 1990s, three enormous firms -- WPP Group, Omnicom Group, and Interpublic -- dominate the industry, along with another half-dozen or so agencies based mostly in New York, but also in London, Chicago, Paris, and Tokyo.

Why, exactly, do firms like Disney, Bertelsmann, and Time Warner feel the need to get so large? Because when the effects of sheer size, conglomeration, and globalization are combined, a true sense of the profit potential emerges. When Disney produces a film, for example, it can also guarantee film showings on pay cable television and commercial network television. It can produce and sell soundtracks based on the film. It can create spin-off television series, it can produce related amusement park rides, CD-ROMS, books, comics, and merchandise to be sold in Disney retail stores. Moreover, Disney can promote the film and related material incessantly across all its media properties. In this climate, even films that do poorly at the box office can become immensely profitable. Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) generated a disappointing $200 million at the global box office. However, according to *Adweek* magazine, it is expected to generate $500 million in *profit* (not just revenues), after the other revenue streams are taken into account. Of course, hit films can become spectacularly successful. The Lion King (1994) earned over $600 million in global box office, but generated over $1 billion in profit for Disney. Moreover, media conglomerates can and do use the full force of their various media holdings to promote their other holdings. They do so incessantly. In sum, the profit whole for the vertically integrated firm can be significantly greater than the profit potential of the individual parts in isolation. Corporations that lack this cross-selling and cross-promotional potential are simply incapable of competing in the global marketplace.

In establishing new ventures, media firms are likely to employ joint ventures, whereby they link up -- usually through shared ownership -- with one or more other media firms on specific media projects. Joint ventures are attractive because they reduce capital

requirements and risk, permitting the firms to spread their resources more widely. For this reason, the nine largest global media firms have, on average, joint ventures with six of the other eight giants. Each of them also has even more ventures with smaller media firms. Beyond joint ventures, there is also overlapping direct ownership of these firms. Seagram, owner of Universal, for example, owns 15 percent of Time Warner and has other media equity holdings. TCI is a major shareholder in Time Warner and has holdings in numerous other media firms.

Even without joint ventures and cross ownership, competition in oligopolistic media markets is hardly "competitive" in any meaningful sense of the term. Reigning oligopolistic markets are dominated by a handful of firms that compete -- often quite ferociously within the oligopolistic framework -- on a non-price basis and are protected by severe barriers to entry. The "synergies" of recent mergers rest on and enhance monopoly power. No start-up studio, for example, has successfully joined the Hollywood oligopoly in 60 years. With characteristic bluntness, Rupert Murdoch of News Corporation describes the central issue confronting any oligopolistic firm when pondering how to proceed in the media market: "We can join forces now, or we can kill each other and then join forces."

When one overlays the map of joint ventures on the global media marketplace, even the traditional levels of competition associated with oligopolistic markets may be exaggerated. "Nobody can really afford to get mad with their competitors," says TCI chairman John Malone, "because they are partners in one area and competitors in another." The *Wall Street Journal* observes that media "competitors wind up switching between the roles of adversaries, prized customers and key partners." In a real sense, the global media and communication market bears the characteristics not only of an oligopoly but of a cartel -- or at least a "gentleman’s club."

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When one considers the myriad broadcast and media channels now available, it seems plausible to argue that scarcity is no longer a viable rationale for the existence of public service broadcasting. But when one considers the monopolistic tendencies of this global market -- its hypercommercialism, its close link to the most powerful and wealthiest segments of society, and the nature of the content it generates -- the need for public service broadcasting (and media) seems more necessary than ever.

Consider, for example, the decline of journalism that accompanies the rise of the Disneys, Time Warners, and Rupert Murdochs to the commanding positions in global news media. Traditionally, there has existed a relatively sophisticated journalism pitched at business interests and the upper middle classes, and an inexpensive schlock journalism pitched at the masses. Among the new giants of the news media, however, a commitment to high-quality journalism as a necessary public service evaporates as soon as the bottom line comes into

view. Good journalism is expensive. Good journalism usually antagonizes powerful political and business interests. So it was in 1994 that Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation discontinued carrying the BBC World Service television channel in Asia because the Chinese leadership let it be known that doing so would undermine Murdoch's chance at the lucrative Chinese market. And when Disney purchased ESPN in 1995, Disney CEO Michael Eisner acknowledged that ESPN's appeal was that it never antagonized political powers in any nation. When Disney fulfilled a contractual obligation and distributed the pro-Tibetan *Kundon* in 1997, Eisner bent over backwards to kiss the rear ends of the Chinese leaders, all but promising that Disney would never again make the mistake of delving into China's "internal" affairs. Disney even hired Henry Kissinger to massage the Chinese leadership on its behalf. Also in 1997, Time Warner's CNN addressed its declining ratings by airing an interview with O.J. Simpson and subsequent shows analyzing the interview. These corporate decisions are based entirely upon self-serving economic considerations, not on traditional journalistic considerations. It goes without saying that not one of these new media giants would ever follow the lead of Baruch Ivcher, the Peruvian TV station owner who has been threatened with deportation or arrest for persistently exposing the corruption of the Fujimori government.

The degradation and demise of journalism in the hands of the corporate media giants does not reflect any sort of conspiracy; it is the logical result of the commercial market. But this is not to say that the media giants are value-neutral. Actually, the firms atop the global media system do have distinct positions on some of the most important issues of the day. Like other large firms, they want low taxes on business and the well-to-do. They want limited government regulation of their businesses, although they favor government assistance if it increases profitability. As firms significantly depend upon advertising for revenues, they have a clear interest in seeing the type of corporate capitalism that spawns advertising spread and prosper into every corner of the globe. And as firms who create products with global markets, they rank as perhaps the leading beneficiaries (and advocates) of trade agreements like NAFTA and GATT. Some global media CEOs, among them Rupert Murdoch, unabashedly extol their hard neoliberal right-wing views and their belief that any interference with their corporate activities represents the dreaded "socialism." But even if the CEOs are less outspoken, corporate interests permeate the organization, and those who wish to rise to the top make them their own. Direct coercion rarely needs to be applied.

And journalism is far from being the only casualty. Without any necessary forethought -- merely by pursuing market dictates -- the global commercial media are superior at creating a depoliticized mass of people that privileges personal consumption over social understanding and activity, a mass more likely to take orders and less likely to make waves. Aside from journalism, the clear focus of the media system is to provide light escapist entertainment. In the developing world, where public relations and marketing hyperbole are only beginning to be utilized, and where elites are more frank about the need to keep the rabble in line, the importance of the commercial media is sometimes frankly stated. As the late Emilio Azcarraga, the billionaire head of Televisa, Mexico's leading commercial broadcaster, put it in 1991: "Mexico is a country of a modest, very fucked class, which will never stop being fucked. Television has the obligation to bring diversion to these people and remove them from their sad reality and difficult future."

So where does public service broadcasting fit into the new world order of the global

commercial media system? On the surface, nowhere. With the rise of the global commercial system, there has been a corresponding decline in public service broadcasting, which only a decade ago dominated most points in Europe and many points elsewhere. In Sweden and Germany, for example, the large public broadcasters have seen their audiences reduced by half in the 1990s -- and these are among the strongest public broadcasting systems in the world. Almost everywhere, the traditional subsidies for noncommercial and nonprofit media are being cut. But, at the same time, even in decline, public service systems command large followings and possess substantial political influence. In Western Europe, in particular, the combined influence of the public broadcasters has been instrumental in keeping major sport telecasts, for example, from being shifted to pay or pay-per-view television. They act, then, as the advocates for the entire population. As a result, public broadcasting remains quite popular. Even in the United States, surveys show it to be one of the most highly regarded public expenditures.

Consider ... the decline of journalism that accompanies the rise of the Disneys, Time Warners, and Rupert Murdochs to the commanding positions in global news media. Traditionally, there has existed a relatively sophisticated journalism pitched at business interests and the upper middle classes, and an inexpensive schlock journalism pitched at the masses. Among the new giants of the news media, however, a commitment to high-quality journalism as a necessary public service evaporates as soon as the bottom line comes into view. Good journalism is expensive. Good journalism usually antagonizes powerful political and business interests. So it was in 1994 that Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation discontinued carrying the BBC World Service television channel in Asia because the Chinese leadership let it be known that doing so would undermine Murdoch's chance at the lucrative Chinese market. And when Disney purchased ESPN in 1995, Disney CEO Michael Eisner acknowledged that ESPN's appeal was that it never antagonized political powers in any nation. When Disney fulfilled a contractual obligation and distributed the pro-Tibetan *Kundon* in 1997, Eisner bent over backwards to kiss the rear ends of the Chinese leaders, all but promising that Disney would never again make the mistake of delving into China's "internal" affairs. Disney even hired Henry Kissinger to massage the Chinese leadership on its behalf. Also in 1997, Time Warner's CNN addressed its declining ratings by airing an interview with O.J. Simpson and subsequent shows analyzing the interview. These corporate decisions are based entirely upon self-serving economic considerations, not on traditional journalistic considerations. It goes without saying that not one of these new media giants would ever follow the lead of Baruch Ivcher, the Peruvian TV station owner who has been threatened with deportation or arrest for persistently exposing the corruption of the Fujimori government.

Nevertheless, public broadcasting is on the defensive. Almost nowhere are the systems confident enough to engage in a full-scale battle with commercial media to defend their turf,

and defend it on the grounds of public service principles. That is a very risky strategy requiring tremendous popular mobilization to succeed. The preferred route -- and the one that offers the best hope for survival in the short and medium terms -- is to accept the global commercial media system as it is, and attempt to locate a safe and lucrative niche within it. In the U.S., for example, PBS has become in many respects a commercial network. It now pitches its new shows on Madison Avenue in search of "corporate underwriting" much as the commercial networks seek advertisers. Even the venerable BBC has acknowledged that its survival as a public service institution in Britain is dependent upon its becoming a significant commercial media force globally. It recently signed major joint venture agreements with the British Flextech and the U.S. Discovery Communications, both of which are either owned outright or significantly by the U.S. TCI.

It seems evident that while this approach may well keep these nonprofit broadcasting systems alive as institutions, there is no end game that involves public service. As the commercial logic expands from within, it almost certainly means that what they broadcast will increasingly be indistinguishable from what is being broadcast by the commercial media giants. And by becoming, in effect, commercial broadcasters, public broadcasters are undermining their legitimate claim to public subsidy, and eventually, their responsibility for public service to the entire population.

This solution to the crisis of public service broadcasting is no solution at all. It is merely a different, if slower, form of death.

The First Amendment and the Mythology of Commercial Broadcasting

The global corporate media giants are not obsessed with smashing public service broadcasting systems per se. They have learned to exist alongside them amicably enough. Indeed, as the cases of PBS and the BBC indicate, they often cooperate with them in commercial joint ventures. Moreover, and somewhat ironically, the commercial media firms can be allies of sorts to movements that wish to keep public broadcasting systems noncommercial -- meaning free of advertising. Because the last thing U.S. media firms want is for PBS and NPR to begin to compete for their advertisers, especially in view of the public system’s affluent, well-educated, upper-middle-class audience -- the kind of audience many important advertisers fantasize about. But the commercial media giants (and the advertising industry) always demand and work for a broadcasting system where the commercial logic is central and public service remains on the margins, serving those audiences that the commercial interests do not find profitable enough to exploit themselves.

At the same time, the commercial broadcasting, media, and advertising industries direct a never ending publicity and political lobbying campaign to promote the merits and genius of a commercial media system and, correspondingly, to deny and denigrate the supposed merits of public service broadcasting. It is well understood that the most powerful cases on behalf of public service broadcasting, from Graham Spry and John Dewey to the present, are premised on the limitations and absurdity of a commercial system. To the extent the two systems both depend upon public support, legislation, and government regulation, and to the extent the logics of the two systems are in opposition, this conflict is unavoidable. The corporate media, with their great wealth and control of access to the mass of people, are

notorious for the leverage they wield over politicians. It was no surprise, then, in September, 1997, when the *Wall Street Journal* declared that the U.S. commercial broadcasting industry could "claim the crown" as "the most powerful lobby in Washington." It has been this way for 60 years. And commercial media lobbies hold similar (though perhaps not quite so formidable) positions of power in nations all over the world. A key part of this political strength is reflected in the broadcasters' expert use of public relations. Indeed, the U.S. broadcast and advertising industries were arguably the two industries that first developed the art of "spin" in its modern form during the 1930s, as a way of smashing their opponents and gaining favorable legislation and regulation.

The corporate media, with their great wealth and control of access to the mass of people, are notorious for the leverage they wield over politicians. It was no surprise, then, in September, 1997, when the *Wall Street Journal* declared that the U.S. commercial broadcasting industry could "claim the crown" as "the most powerful lobby in Washington.". . . A key part of this political strength is reflected in the broadcasters' expert use of public relations. Indeed, the U.S. broadcast and advertising industries were arguably the two industries that first developed the art of "spin" in its modern form during the 1930s, as a way of smashing their opponents and gaining favorable legislation and regulation.

The naked political and economic muscle of the commercial broadcasting industry is of course elegantly draped in layers of velvety public relations, all of which highlight the benevolence of the existing order and the evil of any and all nonmarket alternatives. Some of the myths include the idea that the owners and advertisers are insignificant because professional journalists and producers make the key programming decisions, and/or that revolutionary new technologies eliminate any need for concern about concentrated ownership. In combination, these myths work to prevent, or at least marginalize or neutralize, any public examination of corporate media power.

The single most important myth is the notion of the magical free market which, despite all outward appearances will always produce the optimum social outcome. In media, the free market notion is expressed in the dictum that competitive pressures force the commercial broadcasters to "give the people what they want." I have written at length about the holes in this argument, but there is an element of truth in it that makes it all the more plausible.

In the United States, the notion that commercial broadcasting is the superior system because it embodies market principles is closely attached to the notion that the market is the only "democratic" regulatory mechanism, and that this democratic market is the essence of Americanism, patriotism, and all that is good and true in the world. These themes all come together in the incessant campaign by commercial broadcasters to wrap their interests in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the amendment that prevents Congress from abridging freedom of speech and of the press, among other things. On the one hand, this is an ideological battle, because the extent to which commercial broadcasters are seen as the guardians of the First Amendment is the extent to which government or public intervention in their affairs will be regarded as "censorship", and therefore unacceptable. On the other

hand, this is an important legal battle, because the extent to which the federal courts deem the commercial broadcasters worthy of First Amendment protection (ala newspaper publishers) is the extent to which their activities are immune to government regulation. In effect, commercial broadcasting is made part of the Constitution and becomes nearly off-limits to political attack. At present, this is a battle the commercial broadcasters have yet to win in the courts, where the public right to regulate the airwaves has been recognized as more important than the broadcasters' right to do whatever they please. But make not mistake: they are making inroads.

The argument of the commercial broadcasters goes something like this: The First Amendment means that any government intervention in the affairs of the media is prohibited, regardless of the social or political implications. Any government intervention will invariably produce anti-democratic outcomes, regardless of the intent. Even if the market does not produce especially desirable outcomes, the First Amendment demands that media be in the hands of the private sector to develop as it sees fit.

That broadcasting takes place on publicly owned airwaves is considered irrelevant. Newspapers must use publicly owned roads to be delivered, and nobody calls for their regulation. (And for that matter, broadcasting is a vastly more competitive industry than newspaper publishing.) So there is no justification for government regulation; let the market rule. Nor is this simply a U.S. matter. The commercial media have pushed for the U.S. government to advance this interpretation of the First Amendment as the only guarantor of a "free press" upon other nations since at least the 1940s, and in the 1990s this vision has underlaid the media principles implicit in trade deals such as NAFTA and GATT.

Although it goes unstated, the implicit belief among the commercial broadcast media is that it is OK for government to turn a scarce spectrum over to certain commercial broadcasters and effectively subsidize them; it only violates the First Amendment when governmental actions threaten the bottom line. Indeed, the commercial broadcasters' appropriation of the First Amendment is drenched in opportunism as much as any commitment to principle. During the early years of commercial broadcasting, say 1927-1934, when the government was aggressively commandeering the airwaves from nonprofit users for commercial exploitation, the commercial lobby argued that the government needed carte blanche to regulate the airwaves in any way it desired. Once the commercial system was in place, however, the government was viewed as potentially more antagonistic, and any regulation of broadcasting suddenly violated the First Amendment.

More broadly, the corporate media today have an unprincipled relationship to state power. The media complain that any government activities that harm business are grotesque violations of the First Amendment and freedom in general; but government activities that assist corporate power, no matter how unseemly, barely rate comment. Thus the Central Intelligence Agency, the top secret, $30 billion-dollar-a year agency whose abuses of law are legendary, is virtually unreported in the commercial news media. But low-level fraud in the welfare office is considered a crucial public affairs story. And the media giants show scant interest in stopping the government from keeping its affairs secret -- a process aided, ironically, by the supposedly "anti-government" right wing. The media giants use their political muscle not to battle for freedom of information but to protect their corporate privileges and subsidies.

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In the hands of the commercial broadcasters, the First Amendment takes on an almost Orwellian cast. These semi-monopolistic broadcasters eschew any public service obligations and claim that public efforts to demand them violates their First Amendment rights, which in their view means their unimpeded ability to maximize profit regardless of the social consequences. Commercial broadcasters and their ideologues concede that this First Amendment may not seem pretty, but theirs is simply an "absolutist" interpretation. Any other interpretation, their argument goes, opens the door to government tyranny and the end of formal democracy. To make this interpretation more appealing, they dress it up in the metaphor of the "marketplace of ideas." By this, they mean to suggest that so long as there is no governmental interference, all manner of ideas will thrive under democracy's sun, with the truest ideas growing tallest and blooming fairest. The marketplace is assumed to be a neutral, value-free regulatory mechanism. In fact, a commercial "marketplace" of ideas has a strong bias toward rewarding ideas that support the status quo and marginalizing socially dissident views. In practice, the marketplace tends to reproduce social inequality economically, politically, and ideologically.

Given the importance of the First Amendment to the PR and political activities of the corporate media giants, their claims about the First Amendment deserve closer inspection.

The notion that the commercial broadcasters have the only plausible "absolutist" interpretation of the First Amendment -- an interpretation held by the Founding Fathers and, who knows, perhaps handed down to them by Moses or the Big Guy himself -- is self-serving nonsense. First Amendment absolutism is anything but absolute. Modern absolutism and civil libertarian groups like the American Civil Liberties Union were born in the tumultuous first decades of the 20th century, with their passionate commitments to the protection of dissident political opinion and labor activism from government harassment. Absolutism was inspired by the promise of democracy but, then, after defining what speech was necessary for democracy, it was absolutist in its rejection of any government regulation, regardless of the justification.

Hence absolutism -- and arguably any theory of the First Amendment for than matter -- has two components. The theory first determines what speech is protected and then, once that determination has been made, pronounces that it is protected absolutely. But even the most strident "absolutist" cannot avoid determining what speech qualifies for protection, or what constitutes speech. (Hence today's debate is over whether advertising, or food labeling, or campaign contributions are speech.) The first great wave of 20th century absolutists, including people like Alexander Meiklejohn, argued that the First Amendment protected any and all political speech under any and all circumstances. But they also argued that

commercial speech (for example advertising) was protected not by the First Amendment but rather by the Fifth Amendment and its "freedom to contract" clause. Indeed, Meiklejohn argued that if commercial speech were given the same weight under the First Amendment as political speech, the First Amendment would lose its integrity and soon become primarily a tool for commercial interests who had no particular interest whatsoever in politics and public life per se.

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Commercial speech, on the other hand, was never considered fair game for First Amendment protection by the first generation of absolutists, nor is it so considered by their most principled academic heirs today. When the U.S. Supreme Court considered in 1942 whether advertising should be protected by the First Amendment from government regulation, the Court, including absolutist Hugo Black, voted 9-0 against the proposition. But in the past 30 years, that has begun to change -- to no small extent because of the sheer commercialization of culture, as the market began its spread into every nook and cranny of social life. When commercialism penetrates everything, and when noncommercial public life diminishes or merges with commercialism, the capacity to distinguish between the two is compromised.

The commercialization of the press or the media was the critical factor that accentuated the problem of maintaining a strict line between political and commercial speech. Although discussions of the First Amendment protection of a "free press" often simply take discussions of individual speech and apply them to the press without qualification, there are important differences. It is one thing to assure individuals of their right to say whatever they please without fear of government regulation or worse. This is a right that can be enjoyed by every individual on a relatively equal basis, since everyone has a right to say what he likes on the proverbial street corner soapbox. It is quite another thing to say that every individual has the right to establish a newspaper or broadcast network with which to disseminate their free speech to a broader audience than what could be reached by the spoken word. Here the free speech analogy weakens. As a practical matter, this right is denied to almost everyone. Those who possess the wherewithal to establish their own vehicles for "free speech," whether a newspaper or a radio station, are in a position to determine who is empowered to disseminate their free speech to the great mass of citizens -- and who is not. Plainly, in this sphere, the doctrine of "free speech" accords special privileges to some citizens and effectively gives them the power to dominate public debate, thereby drowning out those who are unable to own newspapers and radio stations, or who are refused access to the media by those who own them.

The core debate for First Amendment theorists, then, is whether the First Amendment protects the rights of press owners absolutely, regardless of the implications for democracy, much as it protects the rights of individuals to free speech, regardless of the content of that speech.

The alternative is to view the First Amendment protection of a free press as a social right to a diverse and uncensored press. In this view, the right to a free press is a right enjoyed by all citizens equally, not just by press owners. Here the explanation for constitutional protection is implicitly linked to the necessity of a free press for the health of a functioning democracy. (If not, there would be no more need to guarantee free speech in the First Amendment than there would be for guaranteeing individuals the right to establish a bakery or a shoe repair service. As Meiklejohn correctly points out, such commercial rights are explicitly covered in the constitution in the Fifth Amendment.)

In fact, few dispute the argument that the free press clause was inserted in the First Amendment to protect democracy. In colonial times, the press was explicitly connected to political parties and factions; such protection was necessary to protect minority political opinion from direct harassment by the dominant political party that controlled Congress and the government. Was this a legitimate concern? Absolutely. Only a few years after the adoption of the First Amendment, the crisis surrounding the Alien and Sedition Acts emerged, in the course of which the dominant Federalist Party attempted to muzzle dissident Republican newspaper editors.

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The conflict between the anti-democratic potential of a private press system and the needs of democracy was not an important debate for much of U.S. history. During the early days of the republic, the press system was highly partisan, often subsidized by government printing contracts or partisan contributions, politically motivated, and relatively noncommercial. In this period, even small political factions found it relatively easy to establish and maintain all shades of political organs. One need only consider the broad array of abolitionist and feminist newspapers in the first half of the 19th century to appreciate the capacity of the press system to accommodate a wide range of political opinion. Later, during much of the l9th century, the partisan press system was replaced by a highly competitive, yet still fairly political, commercial press system. But even in this system, there was still relative ease of entry to the market. A cursory glance at any city of moderate to large size would disclose a diverse press representing nearly every segment of the population. The press systems of the republic's first century were far from perfect, but they were by no means a primary barrier to

political democracy.

All this began to change toward the end of the 19th century, when the press (and, later, the media generally) became an important capitalist industry, following the explicit logic of the commercial marketplace. Over time, the media system became vastly less competitive in the economic sense. Not only were most media industries concentrated in the hands of a small number of large firms, but barriers to entry made new competitive challenges almost impossible. Hence, the "ease of entry" to make free press protection in the First Amendment a near-universal right for citizens was effectively eliminated. As a consequence, virtually no new daily newspapers have been successfully launched in existing markets in the United States since World War I, despite their immense growth and profitability. Moreover, the logic of the marketplace has led to the conglomeration of media giants so that the largest firms like Time Warner and Disney have dominant holdings across nearly every major media sector.

And that's not all. The media have become increasingly dependent upon advertising revenue for support, which has distinct implications for the nature of media content. Modern advertising was an outgrowth of the arrival of corporate capitalism in the past century, and advertising is conducted disproportionately by the very largest corporations. (In the business press, the media are often referred to as simply a branch of the advertising industry.) This corporate media system has none of the intrinsic interest in politics or journalism that existed in the press of earlier times. At its worst, this commercial "marketplace of ideas" is a hideous parody of the free marketplace of ideas inspired by John Milton and John Stuart Mill. Truth is less something to be respected and argued over than it is something to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Truth, as such, loses its intrinsic meaning. The system's commercialized newsfare, if anything, tends to promote depoliticization, and all evidence suggests that its fundamental political positions, such as they are, are closely linked to political and business elites. In view of the ownership and subsidy, anything else would be astonishing. To be fair, the formal right to establish a free press is exercised by dissidents on the margins; but the commercial system is such that these voices have no hope of expanding beyond their metaphorical house arrest.

In our time, the emergence of this gigantic, domineering corporate media system augurs a moment of truth for the First Amendment and its protection of a free press. Are corporations the same as people? Do shareholders and executives at corporations -- clearly driven by law to maximize profit regardless of the social implications -- possess the unconditional right to censor media content? Should investors be granted the First Amendment right to select and censor journalists when they have no more concern for the press per se than they have for any other potentially profitable investment? Is it right that this capacity to censor be restricted to the very wealthiest Americans, or their hired hands? How does one distinguish what speech is necessary for politics -- and thereby absolutely protected by the First Amendment -- when it seems that all speech is increasingly concerned only with commercial gain, and political democracy is not even a prerequisite for its existence? And if the First Amendment does in fact absolutely protect the corporate media, by what logic should it not also protect corporate advertisers, or food manufacturers, or commerce in general?

The implicit answers to these questions suggest that being a free speech absolutist for a commercial media system has precious little to do with democracy and a great deal to do

with protecting a powerful industry (and the class that owns it) from the same public accountability faced by similar industries.

This conflict first emerged in the Progressive Era, when chain newspaper ownership, one newspaper towns, and commercial advertising had converted much of the U.S. press into blatant advocates for the status quo, while the nominal right to launch newspapers meant little to dissidents who could not survive commercially in a semi-monopolistic market. The material response to this crisis was the introduction of "professional" and "objective" journalism and formal university-level schools of journalism, usually at the urging of the largest newspaper publishers. By the logic of "professionalism," journalists would produce a neutral product that did not reflect the biases of the owners, the advertisers, or themselves. Hence, while the owners maintained control of the industry and enjoyed First Amendment protection, they would informally recognize the need for autonomous journalism with integrity that the public could trust. How successful or viable professionalism has been as a counterbalance to corporate commercial media control has been the subject of considerable debate over the years. Recently, however, most observers have conceded that journalistic autonomy has been diminished, or eliminated, by commercial pressures from corporate owners.

Some "Meiklejohnians" -- most notably Jerome Barron -- would eventually argue that a commitment to the spirit of the First Amendment required the government to intervene to ensure that semi-monopolistic newspapers provided the public with a diverse range of views. But for the most part, those in the Meiklejohnian tradition have shied away from this response to the anti-democratic implications of the corporate media market: the prospect of government intervention or censorship in the press is simply not acceptable under any circumstances. The experience of the media under fascist, stalinist, and other authoritarian media systems justifiably makes everyone leery of government regulation. And when the Supreme Court heard Barron's argument in *Miami Herald v. Tornillo* in 1974, it voted 9-0 against his position. Justice William O. Douglas, himself a famous liberal justice, displayed his utter contempt for Barron's position by reading a newspaper during his argument.

There are two other "Meiklejohnian" solutions to the crisis for democracy generated by a corporate-dominated, commercially marinated media system. The most radical is to eliminate commercial media for the most part and create a large nonprofit, noncommercial media system accountable to the public. In the Progressive era, for example, John Dewey and others proposed that newspapers be established as nonprofit and noncommercial enterprises, supported by endowments, and managed through direct public election (or election by the workers) of their officers. Even press magnate Joseph Pulitzer broached the idea of converting his newspapers into nonprofit trusts to be run like universities. (He backed down, one suspects, when his heirs got wind of the idea.)

The less radical solution is to accept the existence of the corporate media giants, but to tax them (or use public monies) to establish a viable nonprofit, noncommercial media system to serve the needs of the majority of citizens who lack the resources to own media corporations.

But proposals like these have met with significant corporate opposition. Even sympathizers have expressed their concern that such a revision would permit the government to control media to an unacceptable extent, no matter how the nonprofit media system might be

structured. From the Progressive Era to the present day, the corporate media giants have fanned the flames of this sentiment, using their immense resources to popularize the notion that a Gulag-style, "darkness at noon" media system was the only possible alternative to the corporate, commercial status quo. Piously, they have preached that any challenge to their power was a challenge to democracy.

Broadcasting, in particular, offered the most hope for those who wished to see a First Amendment committed to democratic media, since the limited number of possible channels meant that there was no escaping that the government would determine who would broadcast and who would not, and the terms under which they would broadcast. All Supreme Court decisions have affirmed the right of the government to regulate broadcasting in a manner that would be unconstitutional if applied to the print media. In broadcasting, at least, the First Amendment has formally been acknowledged to be the property of viewers and listeners more than of licensed broadcasters. Hence, even though the print media were off-limits here there was one area where the public could organize to demand a system that pursued the principles of public service.

Broadcasting proved to be the Waterloo of Meiklejohnian absolutism. In the 1930s, the ACLU, inspired by its mentor Meiklejohn and with the active encouragement of John Dewey, was so alarmed by the explicit and implicit censorship in corporate and advertiser control of radio -- especially against labor and the left -- that it argued that the very system of commercial broadcasting was a violation of the First Amendment. For most of the 1930s, the ACLU worked with the broadcast reform movement to have the government establish a nonprofit, noncommercial radio system that would foster more coverage of social issues and public affairs, freer exchange of ideas, and greater diversity of opinion. The ACLU only backed off from this position when it became clear that the corporate power was entrenched and unchallengeable -- not as the result of principled debate. After abandoning its commitment to structural reform, the ACLU went from being a proponent of an aggressive regulation of commercial broadcasters in the public interest to the ambiguous defender of the commercial broadcasters to do whatever they pleased to maximize profits without government interference. Eventually, many liberals and progressives connected to the ACLU and elsewhere began to concentrate on defending the First Amendment rights of commercial broadcasters to censor material as they saw fit.

Since then, absolutists and civil libertarians in general have shown increased willingness to include commercial activities under the rubric of the First Amendment, even if their relationship to political democracy is weak or nonexistent. This position was fueled to some extent by the aggressive lobbying of media, advertising, and corporate interests. Those interests were ever eager to eliminate government regulation of their activities, and always quick to invoke high-minded principles to justify their self-interest. If not in the nation’s law schools, at least in the popular mind these corporate interests and their think-tank ideologues have been among the leading definers and advocates of an "absolutist" version of the First Amendment. Eventually their efforts paid off. In the 1970s, for the first time, the courts began to include corporate activities under the First Amendment -- thereby weakening or eliminating government regulation of commercial activities.

In my view, this softening stance toward nonpolitical speech was less the result of a principled debate on the matter than it was simply a concession to the total domination of

U.S. society by enormous corporations, commercial values, and aggregated capital in general. If the line between what is commercial and what is political is muddled -- and it became increasingly muddled during the course of the 20th century -- absolutists and civil libertarians have two options. One is to extend the First Amendment to include more commercial fare; the other is to narrow the First Amendment down so that it only covers noncommercial and perhaps even nonprofit speech. The former course offends no one in power and comports to the existing social structure, hence requiring no social change. The latter course goes directly counter to the trajectory of the political economy, hence demanding an explicit commitment to sweeping institutional change in the media industries and placing one in direct conflict with dominant media and corporate power. The latter course regards the First Amendment as a fundamentally radical statement, not a fundamentally conservative one. This was in fact the logical trajectory of Meiklejohnian absolutism, and its decline mirrors the general decline of the democratic left in the United States.

But as impractical as Meiklejohnian absolutism seems today, Meiklejohn's analysis hit the bullseye. As he feared, we are losing our capacity to distinguish public life from the commercial realm, with public life suffering as a consequence. It is a primary factor in the rampant depoliticization and atomization of social life. Indeed this is a theme that resounds in some of the most penetrating contemporary social criticism, from C. Wright Mills and Jürgen Habermas to Noam Chomsky and Robert Putnam. As one legal scholar has noted, in the 19th century the image of the market was used to expand the boundaries of free speech, whereas in the 20th century the image of free speech has been used to expand the power and scope of the market. It is a crisis that the proponents of extending the First Amendment to commercial broadcasters and to commercial speech are incapable of addressing. They therefore dismiss it as irrelevant.

In our time, the emergence of this gigantic, domineering corporate media system augurs a moment of truth for the First Amendment and its protection of a free press. Are corporations the same as people? Do shareholders and executives at corporations -- clearly driven by law to maximize profit regardless of the social implications -- possess the unconditional right to censor media content? Should investors be granted the First Amendment right to select and censor journalists when they have no more concern for the press per se than they have for any other potentially profitable investment? Is it right that this capacity to censor be restricted to the very wealthiest Americans, or their hired hands? How does one distinguish what speech is necessary for politics -- and thereby absolutely protected by the First Amendment -- when it seems that all speech is increasingly concerned only with commercial gain, and political democracy is not even a prerequisite for its existence? And if the First Amendment does in fact absolutely protect the corporate media, by what logic should it not also protect corporate advertisers, or food manufacturers, or commerce in general?

And so, today, we have this irony: engraved over the entryways to the headquarters for many of the largest corporate media firms (and of the entryways to many of the journalism schools that dutifully train employees to serve these same corporations) are lofty quotations from John Stuart Mill, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and other greats from the liberal pantheon -- all of them invoking the necessity of a free press to establish an informed citizenry and a viable democracy. And all the while, the corporate media, marching behind their "absolutist" commitment to the First Amendment, produce a media culture that makes a mockery of these democratic values. If ours was a world where honesty was not regarded as a nuisance, our media giants would remove those incised quotes and replace them with more appropriate visionaries of the current media system. Although I have never been approached by Rupert Murdoch or Michael Eisner or any other corporate media executive on this matter, if I were, I would tell them exactly who to designate as architect of the modern "free" press: Josef Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany.

Why Goebbels? Well, consider three of his most important maxims for Nazi media.

- First, Goebbels argued that the Nazi news media should be such that the more of it Germans consumed, the less they would know, and the more likely they would be to support Nazi policies unconditionally. Unfortunately this seems to be exactly the case with much of our contemporary corporate media fare. The most striking recent example, perhaps, was the survey from the Persian Gulf War that showed the more TV news coverage of the war people watched, the less they knew about the war, and the more they supported government policy.

- Second, Goebbels' first edict to the German film industry was to avoid political themes and to concentrate on light entertainment and escapist fare. The current system seems to have accomplished that, too. The corporate film industry has virtually eliminated social commentary and serious drama from its output, and devotes the bulk of its resources to light comedy and action fare. Instead of *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Citizen Kane* we get *Dumb and Dumber*. Dr. Goebbels would be impressed.

- Third, Goebbels asserted that the media system should give the outward appearance of diversity, but underneath there should be a clear sameness to the messages being conveyed. What better describes a system with the potential for hundreds of cable channels, but which in fact airs only a handful of commercially marinated genres, and where each of the media giants apes the successful output of its competitors?

Now I admit that dwelling on Josef Goebbels as the appropriate symbol for contemporary media is not entirely fair. In the interest of accuracy, the corporate media giants and journalism schools should probably reserve a place over their entryways next for the words of another, even more famous German: the Führer himself, Adolf Hitler. Hitler's inclusion is especially appropriate when one considers how much the media, and especially commercial broadcasting, are part of the advertising industry. As the CEO of Westinghouse, owner of CBS Television and of the largest group of radio stations in the world, stated in 1997: "We're here to serve advertisers. That's our raison d'être." And when Hitler came to power, the U.S. advertising industry noted that, finally, one of their own had grabbed the brass ring. "Whatever Hitler has done," the trade publication *Printers' Ink* wrote in 1933, "he has depended almost entirely upon slogans made effective by reiteration, made general by

American advertising methods. . . . Hitler and his advertising man Goebbels issued slogans which the masses could grasp with their limited intelligence. . . . Adolf has some good lines of present-day application to American advertisers."

Naturally, this sort of praise for Hitler died off after the war began. The industry shifted its position to arguing that propaganda was bad when governments did it, but perfectly acceptable when done by advertisers on behalf of corporate clients. After the war it wasn't even called propaganda anymore.

This private control and formal independence from the government is the genius of the current media system. Clearly, it is superior to, and more refined than, the flawed Goebbels model as an engine of social control. As Meiklejohn's mentor, Walter Hale Hamilton, put it in the 1930s: "Business succeeds rather better than the state in imposing restraints upon individuals, because its imperatives are disguised as choices." So it is, in the past decade, that the number of working journalists has been cut, that the foreign bureaus of U.S. media firms have been shut down, that the content of the media has been shaded to suit the needs of the owners, the advertisers, and the business community in general. Had these things occurred as the result of government edicts, it would have been regarded as a gross violation of the First Amendment, perhaps precipitating the worst constitutional crisis since the U.S. Civil War. Watergate, by comparison, would have looked like a day at the beach.

As it is, however, these developments happened through the organic workings of the commercial media market, receiving virtually no notice -- surprise, surprise! -- in the press or among the populace. Indeed, the First Amendment has been twisted to ensure that this process continues without recognition, debate, or interruption. Sad to say, the current corporate media machine makes Goebbels look like a small time hustler.

The Struggle for Media Reform

My argument leads to the inescapable conclusion that we need public service broadcasting more than ever before. Moreover, we need to study, debate, and reconceptualize what we mean by public service broadcasting. In view of the new technologies, I believe we should think in terms of a pluralistic system with national, regional, and local channels. We should think in terms of well-subsidized national services as well as localized public access channels. In the United States, for example, a tax of, say, 5 percent on advertising would generate between $7 and $9 billion annually. Such a sum could pay for an extraordinary public broadcasting system. Moreover, a supercharged public broadcasting system would have a tremendous effect on the balance of the media. As a major engine of journalism and filmed entertainment, it could prod the media giants from their lethargic news and entertainment practices. Such a public service would also be easily utilized as a major website on the Internet, hence bringing a viable nonprofit and noncommercial presence to an extraordinary new medium that is being colonized and commercialized by the corporate communication sector at warp speed. Indeed, the commitment to public service broadcasting in the digital era is effectively a commitment to public service media writ large.

But establishing a role on the margins of the existing system is not enough. That is an unstable and perilous position that makes the maintenance of adequate subsidy very difficult.

And make no mistake about it: the battle is not merely to ensure that nonprofit and noncommercial media will exist, but to make certain they have the resources to do effective journalism, quality entertainment, and other programming. Lacking an adequate subsidy, the nonprofit and noncommercial sector can continue to exist, quite harmlessly, on the margins, with the main function of letting malcontents blow off steam and proving just how "free" and "open" the corporate system must be. (Look, the dissidents are right there on that obscure community radio station, rather than in prison!)

This is not good enough. The ultimate goal must be to have the public service sector be the dominant component of the broadcasting and media system. Hence the struggle for public service broadcasting cannot avoid direct confrontation and conflict with the existing corporate media giants. Our goal must be to break them up into smaller units, and to encourage the success of media workers' unions as a counterbalance to corporate muscle. And commercial broadcasters should be held to high public service standards. For example, there is no reason that children's TV shows or TV news programs should have any advertising.

But these are matters I can only raise, not settle. They are the proper subject of political debate. Our most immediate job is to put media issues on the political agenda, to convince people that it is their right in a democratic society to establish a media system that serves their needs. What I have presented so far suggests this will not be an easy task, especially in the United States where media power is concentrated and protected by world-class public relations. But it is not a hopeless task. Surveys and repeated experiences suggest that the U.S. people, and people elsewhere, are not enthralled with the corporate commercial media culture. It's just that people often lack even the most elementary level of information -- after all, where would they get it, except through the media system? -- and they have been alternately seduced and pummeled by corporate propaganda. They feel powerless to effect change, and frankly, they have a point. In this vacuum, right-wing media theories can and do prosper; but what is striking is how little they actually do resonate with the mass of people. The area of media reform is wide open and waiting for democratic media activists to exploit.

In this scenario, where there is a paucity of reliable information, there is a crucial role to be played by communication scholars and academics. Our job is to conduct research on how the current system works and present it in as accessible a manner as possible. Our job is to study and report on the history of communication policy-making and nonprofit media, and their link to democratic politics. Our job is to subject the corporate media PR claims to rigorous scrutiny and then publicize the results of our research to the best of our ability. Our job is to connect with scholars with similar concerns in other academic disciplines and fields, and to work closely with media reform activists. Our job is not to be anybody's cheerleader or to pull any punches. Our job is to maintain a commitment to democratic values, to tell the truth, and to let the chips fall where they may.

Sadly, communication scholars, at least in the United States, have dropped the ball in this regard. To some extent, this is due to the general structure of Academe, which encourages scholars to avoid conflicts with the powers-that-be. As Noam Chomsky once noted, the United States has the most cowardly intellectual class in the world. To a great extent, in communication particularly, this is due to the close attachment of academic departments to the media industries. This relationship gives a strong push to what Paul Lazarsfeld termed

"administrative" research that serves media owners, rather than "critical" research that aims to serve democratic ideals. It is striking how little of the most useful critical work in communication is actually generated by scholars in communication departments.

But, tragically, this barely begins to explain much of the worthlessness of academics, in communication and otherwise, to democratic media activists in the United States and worldwide. The past decade or so has seen the rise of the "postmodern" flood to positions of prominence across colleges and universities, especially in communication and cultural studies. I have written quite critically about the weaknesses of postmodernism as a democratic political paradigm and have no interest in dredging those arguments up again.

But the academic picture is not entirely gloomy. For example, I was recently privileged to attend, along with your own Marc Raboy, a "Democratizing Global Communication" conference with 35 or 40 other activists and intellectuals. The point of the conference was to see how we could work together to promote democratic communication, in particular a document called the People's Communication Charter (PCC). The PCC was drafted by European and Third World communication scholars and proposes a set of universal human rights, if you will, for communication. It is a fine document, calling for rights for journalists, for children, and it opposes censorship and either governmental or corporate/commercial domination of media. The point of the conference was to see how the assembled scholars and activists could help get the PCC into broader circulation and use it to organize movements for democratic media, including public service broadcasting. In my view, this is exactly the type of activity I think communication scholars can and must participate in.

But, to continue: at this conference were also a handful of self-described postmodernists, all academics. (It is always entertaining to see how non-academic activists respond to postmodernists, particularly the academic ones. In my experience, they are always astonished at the drivel that emanates from them. They get a look in their eyes, like "What planet do these jokers live on, and who is paying for this stuff?")

Of course, politically-minded postmodernists love to present themselves as the self-appointed representatives of some dispossessed group in their seminars or at conferences like the one I am describing. And -- allow me to repeat -- in my experience, activists in the communities postmodernists claim to represent in seminars are appalled by much of what postmodernism stands for, to the extent anyone can figure it out. What was clear at this conference, however, was how little the postmodemists know or care about politics and democracy. Their only contributions were to pee on everyone's ideas as invariably oppressing some group they claimed to represent from the vantage point of their seminar rooms and university offices. The entire thrust and logic of their arguments was to downplay any and all efforts at political organization and political activism -- the only known manner of creating democratic social change.

Indeed, the only form of activity that seemed to move these postmodernists was personal career enhancement. And that's not all.

The "star" postmodernist at the conference, who spoke at the main opening plenary, produced a statement of her ideas on "Democratizing Global Communication" that was distributed to conference attendees. I would like to share her final few sentences with you:

> In an era of pervasive intertextuality, the politics appropriate to democracy may demand a continual critical cognizance -- both of radical contingency of social worlds and the expressive activity involved in articulating its parameters. If we acknowledge politics to be cultural activity, then its practices will demand appropriate access to materiality of both means and mediums of expressive communication. A radical democratic politics, then, may involve more than simply a libertarian celebration of regimes of freedom for appropriation. Postcolonial circumstances cut across the grain of postmodern practices and urge upon us a heightened sensitivity to the differential relations of others and their relationship to the dominant practices of othering -- an ethics of contingency. Such a politics must enunciate an ambivalence with respect to proprietary claims and retain an ironic awareness of the historical contingencies of alignments between authority and alterity. We need to avoid hypostatizing difference in our attention to alterity if we are to promote a politics sensitive to the ongoing production of meaning and emergent registers of cultural difference in global democracies.

I could not have said it better myself.

My point is simply this: there is little in the postmodern tradition to suggest it is of any particular value to democratic activists or scholars, in communication or anywhere else. And so long as its bogus claims to representing the "masses" go unchallenged in the academy, the chances of getting a viable, meaningful contribution from communication scholars to media activism are lower than they would be otherwise.

What is necessary, now more than ever, is to organize on media issues among the broader population with the aim of expanding the range of what is possible in Washington and everywhere else. The key strategic move is to locate those segments of the citizenry -- preferably the ones already organized, at least for starters -- that would benefit by a healthy public broadcasting system and a more democratic media setup. In the United States, that includes civil rights groups, education and library groups, children's advocates, journalists, progressive religious organizations, and organized labor -- especially organized labor. The participation of labor, due to its size, its influence, and its historic activism, is absolutely critical if media reform is to ever become a viable prospect anywhere in the world.

Fortunately, the battle for public service broadcasting and democratic communication is not being waged primarily in seminar rooms by pompous academic twits. In many nations of the world, as a response to the hypercommercialized, corporate-dominated media system, grass-roots efforts are under way to protect public media and undercut corporate power. In the United States, there has been a veritable explosion in grass-roots media activism in the 1990s. The media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), has seen the circulation of its magazine *Extra!* skyrocket to over 20,000. The Cultural Environment Movement began in 1996 and is organizing across traditional political boundaries to counter the commercial blitzkrieg on our culture. The Media & Democracy Congress first convened in San Francisco in 1996 and met again in October 1997 with as many as 1,500 participants in New York City. A main objective of the Congress is to coordinate media activists nationwide into a coherent political force. There are now local and national movements to make public radio and public television truly public by eliminating corporate support and by

making the stations directly accountable to their communities. And there are burgeoning media activist movements at the local level; in the past few years, such community-based groups have been formed in New York, Minneapolis, Chicago, Denver, Seattle, and Los Angeles, among other places.

But as encouraging and impressive as this activism is -- and I sense that similar processes are taking place in many other nations -- it is well outside the official range of debate on media issues in the United States. This range of debate on media issues has narrowed ever more during the past 10 or 15 years, reflecting the neoliberal turn taken by our political discourse. Today the mainstream liberal reform lobbying groups in Washington, D.C., that have attempted over the years to nudge legislation and regulation in a more public-minded direction, have almost no leverage at all. (They never had much leverage anyway, and they never had any discernible popular support. How could they, if media policy issues are basically ignored by the news media?)

What is necessary, now more than ever, is to organize on media issues among the broader population with the aim of expanding the range of what is possible in Washington and everywhere else. The key strategic move is to locate those segments of the citizenry -- preferably the ones already organized, at least for starters -- that would benefit by a healthy public broadcasting system and a more democratic media setup. In the United States, that includes civil rights groups, education and library groups, children's advocates, journalists, progressive religious organizations, and organized labor -- especially organized labor. The participation of labor, due to its size, its influence, and its historic activism, is absolutely critical if media reform is to ever become a viable prospect anywhere in the world.

In doing this organizing, modern-day media activists would be wise to take a page from Graham Spry and the first generation of public broadcasting advocates. Spry generated enthusiasm for public broadcasting not merely by pointing out the asininity of commercial broadcasting. He and his colleagues also presented a vision of public broadcasting as a cornerstone of democracy; it was, and is, a vision that had tremendous appeal even to those not especially concerned with media affairs. And this was not the antiseptic democracy of professional do-gooders and bureaucrats; it was a feisty, participatory democracy that reaches out and says to the people: "This is an issue that bears directly on the quality of your life and the health of your community and nation. This is your issue."

This point notwithstanding, the degree of difficulty for establishing genuine public service broadcasting has increased considerably since the days of Graham Spry. Now the entire world faces what then only existed in the United States: a supremely powerful corporate broadcasting (and media) industry that flosses its teeth with politicians, right, left, and center. It is a corporate broadcasting system that is at the very center of the modern economic system quite unlike anything in the 1930s, a system so powerful that non-broadcasting interests have a stake in its preservation and continued hegemony.

To understand how to deal with this leviathan, one must turn to the U.S. reformers of the early 1930s and discern why they failed. What the U.S. reformers needed to do, and failed to do, was to make media reform an indispensable part of broader social reform. That is, to make public broadcasting part of social democratic reform. By this reasoning, the prospects for U.S. public broadcasting in the 1930s were doomed by the lack of a viable political left.

So my logic strongly suggests that the prospects for public service broadcasting and democratic media are inexorably linked to the prospects of a revitalized anti-neoliberal democratic socialist political movement.

But my argument is not simply that media reform cannot succeed without the support and backing of a broader democratic left political movement. It is also that no democratic left can succeed without making media reform a central part of their program. This is not merely because of the anti-left bias of commercial media, but also because media power is now central to overall corporate power in a manner that was never true before. In the past it was understandable, if not always excusable, that democratic left movements had little or no interest in media reform. Today this is not just unacceptable, it is suicidal. Movements that make the restructuring of power in society the center of the platform must, by definition, have media reconstruction and the establishment of public service broadcasting as main planks in their platforms.

This is not going to be an easy task, at least not in the United States. There may be a nascent revitalized organized left, ranging from insurgents in the labor movement and the Labor Party, to the Greens, to the New Party, even to the Progressive Caucus in the U.S. Congress. But with few exceptions, issues of media control barely figure in their platforms if they are present at all. At the 1997 AFL-CIO convention, perhaps the most politically oriented U.S. labor convention since the 1940s, the topic of media reform was never even broached. "This is an issue that is absolutely vital to democracy and that only the left can address. The New Party, the Green Party, the Labor Party, progressive Democrats should be all over this issue," says U.S. Representative Bernie Sanders, the only independent serving in the Congress. "But, for most of the left, it’s not even on the agenda." Sanders has for some years now been a lonely visionary in the United States, speaking up with all too little company about the critical need for the left to make political issues a part of that agenda. And he emphasizes a crucial pragmatic reason for the new parties and movements of the democratic left to emphasize public broadcasting and media reform: democratizing the media is a terrific organizing tool, because in few areas is the conflict between profit maximization and democracy more readily apparent to the great mass of citizens.

This is the new reality of political activism, a reality that progressives around the world have been quicker to recognize than their American peers. Spin the global dial and you can tune into a whole new approach to politics -- an approach that recognizes the power of corporate media and offers an alternative vision.

In New Zealand, for example, Pam Corkery left her job as one of that nation’s top broadcast journalists and won election to the parliament last year on the ticket of The Alliance, a newly formed left-wing grouping that surprised observers with the strength of its showing. Corkery’s issue, and a central theme in The Alliance’s platform, was a call to roll back corporate control of the media and to beef up nonprofit, noncommercial broadcasting. After her election, she declared that the battle to reassert popular control over the media is, "at the very least, a human rights issue."

In Canada, just months after the Alliance’s New Zealand breakthrough, the New Democratic Party more than doubled its number of parliamentary seats in that country’s May, 1997, elections. The NDP platform included calls for breaking up the Canadian corporate media

chains and for expanding the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canada's public service broadcaster. NDP managers considered the message so vital to the party's efforts to distinguish itself from other parties that, on the eve of a key debate, party leader Alexa McDonough took time from her preparations to participate in a demonstration protesting cutbacks at the CBC.

In Sweden, the Left Party, a socialist grouping that has filled the void created by the Swedish Social Democrats' move to the right, is sounding even more radical themes. The platform on which the Left Party has emerged as one of Scandinavia's fastest growing political movements calls for abolishing all advertising on radio and television, and an aggressive program of subsidies to maintain a diverse range of viewpoints in the print media. Media reform is at the heart of the Left Party's program, characterized in the party's preamble as being necessary to "strengthen and intensify democracy".

These are not isolated developments. Across the world a new democratic left is emerging with a confident and aggressive critique of the neoliberal turn to the market as the source of all economic and social wisdom. In almost every case these parties have made regaining control of the media from corporations and advertisers a primary plank in their political platforms. In the words of Canadian member of Parliament Svend Robinson, an NDP member who has made media issues a prime focus in his campaigns, "This is an issue that's emerging all over the world. It's a huge concern. People are genuinely alarmed that at the same time we're witnessing growing concentration of ownership of media, we're also seeing massive cuts in publicly owned media."

"It's a double whammy," he continues. "This neo-liberal, right-wing takeover of the media is something that people are aware of, and they don't like it. But the old-line parties aren't willing to address the issue. This is what is going to distinguish new-line parties all over the world -- a willingness to talk frankly about issues of media control and to propose an alternative to what's happening."

It is this new world order of commercial media that drives the democratic left around the world to address media issues. "It's inevitable. After you've had somebody say to you for the thousandth time, 'How come we never hear about these issues in the media,' you start to realize that the media itself is an issue," explains Canada's Svend Robinson.

The new parties of the left are not reading off the same page as regards issues of media control and direction. But there are remarkable parallels from country to country. In general, the key issues most everywhere for the left are:

- To protect and expand traditional public service broadcasting, making it fully noncommercial and democratically accountable;

- To develop a distinct community and public access radio and television system that is thoroughly decentralized;

- To strengthen journalists' and media workers' trade unions, giving the members of these trade unions a greater role in determining editorial content;

- To hold commercial broadcasters to strict standards, such as prohibiting advertising directed at children;

- To limit the concentration of media ownership as much as possible;

- To reduce the sheer amount of advertising through regulation and taxation;

- To subsidize film and cultural production eschewed by the market;

- To subsidize the existence of multiple newspapers and magazines to provide a diversity of opinion.

The focus varies from nation to nation. The Australian Democratic party has worked closely with media unions in that country in mounting a massive grass-roots campaign against cuts in government funding for the Australian Broadcasting System; the Brazilian Workers Party has organized mass protests outside the headquarters of broadcast companies that fail to devote serious attention to the political process; the Canadian New Democratic Party is developing legislation that would limit the percentage of newspapers in any region that can be controlled by a single company. Media activism is a new part of the agenda for most of these parties, and few would claim that they have reversed the process of conglomeration and concentration that is being powered by the wealthiest corporations on the planet. But they can point to victories.

In New Zealand, for instance, the Alliance party has focused national attention on the demise of journalistic competition that followed the sale in 1995 of a publicly-owned network of commercial radio stations to Tony O'Reilly, a former Heinz soup company executive who is rapidly building an international media conglomerate. O'Reilly already owns the largest newspaper in New Zealand, the *Auckland Herald* and, after he purchased the privatized stations, he quickly moved to buy up the remaining major radio stations in key New Zealand markets. That move was followed by decisions to lay off staff, weaken competition between media outlets, and give notice that the O'Reilly stations were unlikely to continue purchasing news from Radio New Zealand. The Alliance has used its parliamentary position to spark a national debate about O'Reilly's actions in particular and about the wisdom of privatization in general. Working inside parliament, the Alliance has raised fundamental questions about the danger of one man's controlling so much of a nation's media and it dogged O'Reilly's every move with calls for hearings, debates, and investigations. Outside parliament, the coalition has turned anger at O'Reilly's actions and at cuts in public broadcasting expenditures into an organizing tool, working with labor unions, native groups, environmentalists, and community activists to build a broad coalition of media-conscious activists.

In so doing, the coalition has raised profound questions about the wisdom of privatization of Television New Zealand, which remains publicly owned. So successful has the Alliance's campaign been, in fact, that the New Zealand Labour Party, which for years had supported privatization, has indicated that it will oppose any further media privatization. But the Alliance is not satisfied; according to John Pagani, its media director, the Labour party "appears very reluctant to move on regulation of media organizations -- particularly the issue of limiting foreign ownership or imposing cross-media ownership restrictions." The Alliance

has no such reluctance. And, Pagani expects, the willingness of the coalition to raise issues of media monopoly and battle for a reversal of privatizations will continue to distinguish it from more cautious players -- a distinction that, political observers in New Zealand say, could eventually win it a defining role in the governance of the nation. As Pagani says, "Media issues, privatization issues, this is where you start to see real distinctions between the Alliance and other parties and that distinction is what people are looking for."

I do not wish to exaggerate the extent of this media reform activity by anti-neoliberal democratic left parties and movements, nor do I wish to exaggerate the significance of these movements. But in historical terms, this is a new and important development. If nothing else, I hope this paper has established the need to consider public service broadcasting in a historical as well as a political and economic perspective. Frederic Jameson recently remarked on the pessimism of our anti-historical age, noting that for many people it is easier to think of the end of human existence than it is to think of the end of capitalism.

This burgeoning global media activism can learn one other important lesson from Graham Spry and the first generation of public broadcasting reformers: the need to organize along global lines. In the 1930s it was already apparent how much commercial and public service interests crossed political boundaries. In this era of a consolidated global media market, predicated largely on commercial television, the need for such transnational coordination is self-evident. Cross-border linkages between media activists and independent media have begun to take place, but there is considerable ground to cover. Moreover, there is a need for organized transnational public interest and nonmarket representation before such global bodies as the World Trade Organization. In the end, our goal should be not merely to have a series of national media systems with dominant public service components, but to have a global public sphere as well, where peoples can communicate with each other without having the communication filtered and censored by corporate and commercial interests.

I do not wish to exaggerate the extent of this media reform activity by anti-neoliberal democratic left parties and movements, nor do I wish to exaggerate the significance of these movements. But in historical terms, this is a new and important development. If nothing else, I hope this paper has established the need to consider public service broadcasting in a historical as well as a political and economic perspective. Frederic Jameson recently remarked on the pessimism of our anti-historical age, noting that for many people it is easier to think of the end of human existence than it is to think of the end of capitalism. The pessimism implied by such an attitude contains a self-fulfilling logic that plays directly into the hands of the powers-that-be. I am reminded of one of Ernest Mandel’s final speeches, when he scoffed at the defeatism of our age, noting that as soon as progressives tasted a single victory, the blood would return to their veins. What is most striking about the existing corporate media system is how absurd it really is. We have the technology and the resources to establish an extraordinarily rich and diverse media system, a system that is local, national, and global. What stands in the way is the power of the corporate media giants and the powers-that-be who prosper by the status quo. They are large, numerous, and powerful. But

for all their wealth and power, they are not invincible. "The challenge of our time is to make media relevant for a vibrant democracy," says Bernie Sanders. "This issue is absolutely vital to rebuilding democracy in America and to reasserting the voice of democracy on a global scale."

There is tremendous joy and satisfaction not only in victory but also in the very struggle in collaboration with our sisters and brothers for a more just and democratic world. Ultimately, the quest for public service broadcasting and the broader quest for democratic communication are integral parts of the global struggle for human liberation.

Dr. Robert W. McChesney of the University of Wisconsin (Madison) is a media scholar, historian and activist.

McChesney has written widely on media history and telecommunications policy. He is one of the leading U.S. experts on the question of public broadcasting and nonprofit media systems. He has also studied the effects of corporate control and advertising on the nature of journalism, and is currently analysing the ongoing policy debates surrounding the Internet and telecommunications. In addition to numerous books and articles in the academic and popular press, McChesney hosts a radio public affairs program in Madison, and is active in many nonprofit publications and broadcasting services. He is also on the steering committee of the Cultural Environment Movement.

On the basis of his academic work and his involvement with respect to media democratisation, Dr. McChesney has brought an important perspective to the issues facing public broadcasting.

His insights into the burgeoning global media activism movement and the connection between public broadcasting and wider social issues are particularly pertinent in light of the issues that now confront the Canadian media landscape.

From www.robertmcchesney.com:

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