

**Reviewing Robert W. McChesney's**  
**“The Problem of the Media:**  
**U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century”**

The past five years of this nation's life have seen great tragedy and undeniable turmoil – from the controversy surrounding the first election of George W. Bush in 2000, to the 9/11 attacks, to military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the up-to-the-minute story of hurricanes Katrina and Rita – and America's pundits and pollsters have hung on for the entire ride. They've been there blow-for-blow and fight-for-fight, and one would be hard-pressed to find a major news event during this season of change that hasn't been subjected to full-force media exposure. But those who listen closer may have also noted a familiar sound just below the din of coverage concerning these culturally and historically significant stories: the still-raging debate over the true nature of our national media's political orientation. Now more than ever, in the midst of an increasingly unpopular war led by an increasingly unpopular president, the left and right are throwing stones to decide just who has more control over the voice of the media.

In many ways, this war of words began and still thrives on the efforts of unsatisfied conservatives. In recent years, primarily since the first election of Bill Clinton, a whole cottage industry has grown up around criticism that purports to expose the media's liberal tendencies. Today, media consumers can pick and choose from any number of conservative critics who are all too eager to rail against the mainstream media: Rush Limbaugh on the radio, Brent Bozell and his Media Research Center online, and Fox News' Bill O'Reilly are but a few examples of a mass-media trend that has gained favor with a large portion of the country.

Just the idea of identifying oneself as a “conservative critic” demonstrates how besieged these individuals feel, a need to position themselves directly against the perceived “liberal” opposition. Of course, in a game of political tug-of-rope, one side can't let the other have the momentum for too long. With that in mind, a number of left-leaning voices have worked to counter the popular critics who have gained ground with

American conservatives, and personalities such as writer-comedian Al Franken, founder of Air America, a liberal attempt at Limbaugh-esque talk radio; Eric Alterman, author of the popular book What Liberal Media?; and progressive nonprofit Media Matters represent liberal attempts at pushing back the right-wing wave. While the stereotypical anti-liberal media criticism is still perhaps in greater evidence on our televisions and radios, there is no doubt that anti-conservative criticism is gaining ground.

With the middle section of The Problem of the Media (subtitle: “U.S. Communication Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”), his imposing critique of national media practice, noted critic and scholar Robert McChesney throws his hat into the ring, calling out conservative critics who in turn spend much of their time calling out the “liberal media” over perceived lapses in judgment and objectivity. As McChesney himself mentions, the debate over the media’s political intentions is not a new one – he estimates it has grown steadily during the last quarter-century, climaxing in recent years with the backlash embodied by Limbaugh, Bozell and others. But the issue is still so great that McChesney, who is regarded as the Noam Chomsky of media criticism, feels compelled to devote an entire chapter, given the weighty and somewhat loaded title of “Understanding U.S. Journalism II,” to the discussion. It doesn’t hurt of course that the conservative argument embodies many of the larger problems McChesney sees in the media today. He writes, “The critique generated by well-funded political conservatives calls journalism excessively sympathetic to causes favored by liberals and the Left ... The result has been a reinforcement of the corporate and conservative bias built into the media system” (McChesney 98).

In order to understand McChesney’s beef with conservative media critics, it’s helpful to take a look at the structure of his book. The Problem of the Media purports, from page one, to be the explanation and final takedown of eight major myths surrounding the media today, as established and protected by “corporate-insider hegemony” (7). In addition to the myth of a liberal media, these fictions include: the idea that the media do not matter; that corporate media ownership is natural and Constitutionally divined; that the public’s opinion on the media has been heard; that commercial media provide the

highest quality coverage; that media pursuits should be market-motivated; that technology itself determines new media forms; and that when pitted against the realities of media operation in today's world, no idealized alternative could possibly fare better.

From the outset, it is clear that McChesney is proceeding from the assumption that many modern-day media troubles stem from our increasingly corporate climate, a position bolstered by a simple trip online to *Columbia Journalism Review's* "Who Owns What" webpage, which provides a quick rundown of fifty-two major media companies, from Advance to Young Broadcasting, and a detailed list of the many properties they own. McChesney argues that the media's inherently commercial structure, reflected by a Bush-Cheney "neoliberalism" that equates profit with progress (11-12), keeps editors, reporters and their outlets on a corporate leash just long enough to grant the appearance of objective, ethical reporting, but in reality such journalists, with the little they've been given, function only as cogs in a machine that is too afraid to spook advertisers or speak out on the issues the public really wants to hear.

Again setting out to untangle a self-designated web of myth, McChesney then underlines the four faulty assumptions he feels conservatives use to prop up the "liberal media" argument: that the burden of decision in American newsrooms actually belongs to journalists, not their advertisers or corporate masters; that journalists tend to be liberal themselves; that journalists abuse their power to advance a liberal agenda; and that truly objective journalism would actually favor a conservative viewpoint.

To determine if the media really are as liberal as some people claim, it would be helpful to poll reporters, editors, and other journalists to identify any political bias they may have, a point McChesney agrees with. For him, this aspect of the conservative argument – the basis for many complaints against the media – holds the most water, and he openly acknowledges that in proportion, more journalists tend to vote Democratic than the general population. He also makes an offhanded reference to a poll of Washington correspondents that showed 90 percent voted for Bill Clinton in 1992 (102). But what McChesney giveth the opposition he also taketh away, and he follows up his initial

admission with the introduction of a personal theory: that most journalists are actually disillusioned and politically apathetic, therefore they are not to blame for any favoritism. In a statement that this reviewer found to be the single most provocative in his book, he writes: “[Survey data] undermines the importance of how journalists vote and their political beliefs. What if owners and managers have most of the power, both directly and through the internalization of their political and commercial values through professional norms?”

It’s a huge question, one that feeds directly into McChesney’s largest and strongest argument: that those who own the news have more power than those who deliver it. After all, if wealthy media firms are owned and operated primarily by Conservatives – McChesney cites a 2000 survey that showed newspaper editors favored Bush over Al Gore three-to-one – might those in a position of authority work to keep only conservative viewpoints on the front page?

Unfortunately for McChesney, while this is a fascinating argument, it is nearly unverifiable as worded, considering that the “internalization” of professional norms among a news staff is rather difficult for an outsider to document. This leaves the author going to great pains to point out instances where the media-at-large could be regarded as “conservative” in recent years: the generally salacious coverage given to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in the late 1990s; the unspoken, almost passive support granted to the Afghanistan and Iraq military campaigns in their early months; reluctance to admit that early stories granting Bush the 2000 election win were premature or favored. But instead of drawing the killer link from his initial speculation to true-life events, McChesney gets caught up on these examples, effectively allowing himself to be strangled by his own argument, and focusing instead on instances that aren’t quite as convincing as they could be. Instead of proving that newsroom leaders made direct calls to sweeten the coverage for conservatives in these cases, McChesney focuses on specific stories as examples. While the opportunity to theoretically prove the media’s twisted logic behind these examples is there, he dwells on small details and misses the big picture.

This has to be a point of frustration for liberals and sympathetic readers looking to side with McChesney, especially considering the considerable strength of his initial argument. Since conservative critics spend most of their time dwelling on what they perceive to be individual instances of prejudice among specific media members, their arguments, regardless of relevance, are limited only to the sphere of the media. McChesney's argument that the entire mainstream media system exists to serve the will of corporations would seem to weaken the conservative approach, since it instead attempts an explanation outside the media itself. But McChesney's seeming indifference or reluctance to invoke provable examples – significant evidence of conservative or anti-liberal bias in the hearts and minds of journalists from mainstream news organizations, apart from speculation – is made all the more disheartening considering this kind of information is one thing Conservatives have in droves.

If you don't have anything nice to say about unabashedly right-wing members of the media, at least concede this point: they are tenacious and absolutely convinced that they're right. This mentality enables them to see evidence of a grand media conspiracy in even the smallest of details, and while their conclusions may not always ring true to outsiders, the information they've amassed over a focused amount of time has been used well to their advantage. Bozell's Media Research Center (MRC) has gone to great lengths to compile evidence of the media playing favorites. On its website the group has compiled the background and results of multiple media surveys, the earliest published in 1981 and the most recent in 2004, each demonstrating a clear favoritism among its subjects toward the Democratic parties ("How the Media Vote," "Journalist's Political Views"). Each of the surveys, attributed to sources ranging from the *Los Angeles Times* to UCLA researchers, focuses on a select group of journalists; groups polled include White House reporters, campaign journalists, and newspaper editors. With a predator's eye for weakness, the MRC has also scrounged together a list it calls "Admissions of Liberal Bias," a series of out-of-context quotes that supposedly betray the liberal intentions of well-known journalists. Though some of the quotes appear fairly harmless, others catch the eye at a quick glance. A few samples:

“I know a lot of you believe that most people in the news business are liberal. Let me tell you, I know a lot of them, and they were almost evenly divided this time. Half of them liked Senator Kerry; the other half hated President Bush.”

-Andy Rooney, CBS commentator, November 7, 2004 (Media Bias Basics 1)

“I believe it is true that a significant chunk of the press believes that Democrats are incompetent but good-hearted, and Republicans are very efficient but evil.”

-John Harwood, *Wall Street Journal* political editor, April 23, 2005 (6)

Taken out of context of course, a random quote can be made to appear in support of any argument, but looking at the combined result of the MRC’s collection – 15 pages of quotes in all, a relative wealth of “evidence” – it’s not hard to see how right-leaning critics have been able to carve out such a market for themselves, nor why some have chosen to follow them, however blindly. Such information, which is ostensibly the direct word of journalists, can be used as a boon for either side when presented like this, and in fact, the Media Matters’ site essentially acts as a liberal counterpoint to the MRC and often approaches its data collection in a similar manner.

Interestingly enough, while rabid Conservatives confronted with McChesney’s points would likely have no problem debating his contention that journalists are primarily apolitical or that even when they are liberal, their politics don’t interfere, it is difficult to find a direct Conservative reaction to the idea that corporate owners hold the most power in the newsroom. Perhaps this is because the issue of media ownership is difficult to contest when faced with the reality in black or white, or more likely, Conservatives feel the evidence they’ve collected speaks for itself, and even if owners and operators are calling the shots, individual media members still get their digs in from time to time. McChesney’s fourth argument – that Conservative critics feel the only truly objective media would be one that supports their cause – seems fairly defensible. After all, it’s hard to find anybody crying out for a truly objective media with the passion that Conservatives and Liberals have summoned for their own causes; most arguments seem slanted from either the right or the left, and appear to exist in an attempt to turn the

institution in their direction. More often than not, someone who complains that the media is too liberal merely wishes the media would be more conservative to atone. How else to explain the Fox News Network, who many defenders see as a just reaction to years of bias from the other side?

Of course, while media members who bicker back and forth and are often able to draw members of the public into the crossfire, the question remains of just how much the majority of Americans actually care about this debate. Based on the evidence of a 2004 Pew Research Center poll, *Columbia Journalism Review's* Andrew Kohut argues that only a small percentage of the public sides with either the right or left on this issue, and that many who are against such bias usually see it as mere hype, an attempt to boost ratings or sales. Granted, McChesney's approach is more nuanced than someone like Bill O'Reilly's, and McChesney's point of view functions as the arm of a larger argument he's trying to make, but his derision of "neoliberalism," and general "C'mon guys!" encouragement/disappointment with liberal politicians (McChesney 12) betrays his political bias. As Kohut writes, "For all the talk about the impossibilities of achieving objectivity, that is the public's aspiration for the news media. American audiences, except for the most partisan segments, have little appetite for people that tell them only what they want to hear." (Kohut 2)

The Problem of the Media, despite McChesney's claims that he is a historian and not a polemicist (McChesney 13), ultimately emphasizes a philosophic approach to its subject, employing rhetorical argumentation in place of hard-line data. Perhaps this is to be expected when discussing a cultural institution not founded in measurable science, but it means also that some arguments have the potential to appear weaker than others, even if that is only due to the nature of the subject. While McChesney's central thesis on the media is provocative and not necessarily weak as a whole, his discussion of perceived bias in the newsroom is weaker than other aspects of his presentation, and suffers ultimately from his decision to base the argument on admitted speculation rather than provable fact. In addition, his apparent slant to the left betrays his own bias on this matter and makes his attacks against Conservative critics feel personal rather than

professional. At the end of the day of course, no single critic or pundit can claim to know the entire nature of our national media, an ever-moving, ever-changing presence, but through studied observance, can come to an understanding of its many facets. Just because he may not always be convincing on certain topics doesn't make McChesney wrong, either specifically or on the whole. It just makes him unconvincing, and that happens from time to time. You could say a lot worse for some of his media critic peers.



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