



# Rich Media, Poor Democracy: COMMUNICATION POLITICS IN DUBIOUS TIMES (History of Communication)

By Robert W. McChesney

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Addresses the corporate media explosion and the corresponding implosion of public life that characterizes our times.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Robert McChesney makes no bones about it: he is a democrat with a small "d," and in this book, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, that spells leftist. As a media scholar (McChesney is a communications professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), he is primarily concerned with "the contradiction," as he puts it, "between a for-profit, highly concentrated, advertising-saturated, corporate media system and the communication requirements of a democratic society." As a citizen, he favors resolving this contradiction through measures that would make your average CEO's skin crawl: massive government subsidies for nonprofit journalism, vigorous antitrust litigation aimed at media conglomerates, and robust regulation of corporate broadcasters.

If your politics lie anywhere to the right of Ralph Nader's, in other words, don't come to this book looking for validation. But for a stimulating, nuanced, and rigorously researched presentation of the case for overhauling the current media regime, look no further. McChesney displays a sure grasp of today's fast-evolving, high-tech mediascape, and his arguments about how to shape its future evolution (especially his critique of the now-prevalent idea that corporations deserve First Amendment rights) unfold with an often-startling common sense. Whether or not you agree with his prescriptions in the end, McChesney's sweepingly expansive notions of democracy--and of the importance of media within it--demand to be reckoned with. --  
*Julian Dibbell*

#### Review

Paradox beats close to the heart of revolutionary periods in history. At the beginning of his book about the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens famously observed that "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness."

The same might be said of our own era. Certainly these days are the best of times in a lot of ways. A Gallup poll last January found that Americans' "overall satisfaction" stands at 69 percent - a record.

But some see a dark lining in the silver cloud of our prosperity. Perennial cyber-promoter Douglas Rushkoff came out last year with *Coercion*, a disturbing look at the threats to privacy lurking behind every door. In *Code*, Harvard Law School professor Lawrence Lessig warned of the invisible hand of those who build the Net's underlying structure.

Now comes Robert McChesney with *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, which focuses on the paradox of today's media: the perception of choice vs. the reality of concentrated ownership.

McChesney is a research associate professor in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as well as a leading member of that vestige of the old left called "media criticism," whence come many of the most dire warnings about current trends.

"This is an age of dazzling breakthroughs in communication and information technologies," McChesney

observes. "Communication is so intertwined with the economy and culture that our times have been dubbed the Information Age."

As the title of his book implies, though, McChesney wonders if the modern-day boom in information channels doesn't simply give the illusion of democracy. The mass market has been broken into thousands of niches, but does freedom of choice equal freedom? McChesney says no.

Moving invisibly behind the rapid expansion of outlets is a disquieting and historic trend toward consolidation, he argues. "The striking structural features of the U.S. media system in the 1990s are concentration and conglomeration." The result, he adds, is that the media have become an antidemocratic force in America. As he sees it, "democracy is in a decrepit state."

He readily admits that his warnings of consolidation may sound more like a faint cry of "wolf" in the face of our present-day stampede of new Web sites, publications and TV stations.

"It may seem ironic that these are the dominant structural features when, to the casual observer, the truth can appear quite the opposite," he writes. "We seem inundated in different media, from magazines and radio stations to cable television channels, and now Web sites."

But if you look closely, he says, consolidation is pervasive. In the Internet Economy, for instance, there are ubiquitous affiliate programs, electronic commerce partnerships, navigators and mergers of historic magnitude as the recent AOL-Time Warner marriage.

Of course, McChesney is not the first to sound the alarm about the dangers of media monopoly. In 1822, James Madison wrote that "a popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both." In the 20th century, prominent media critics have included Ben Bagdikian (*The Media Monopoly*), Noam Chomsky (*Media Control*) and Norman Solomon (*The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media*).

Consequently, McChesney's book might sound like a rehash of old arguments. While *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* continues down a well-worn path of media criticism, it nevertheless breaks important new ground.

For instance, McChesney points out that media concentration has traditionally been horizontal, but its modern form is vertical. For example, all but 16 of America's 148 widely distributed films in 1997 were produced by the six largest studios. That's horizontal concentration.

The shift to vertical integration means a studio like Walt Disney now controls not only the content, but also many of the stages before and after - movie studios, TV-program production facilities, cable channels, broadcast networks, broadcast channels, record labels, magazines, newspapers, book publishers, and the list goes on and on.

Vertical integration is why Disney toy figures start showing up in fast-food restaurants whenever the studio premieres a new film.

Not only is the average American oblivious to what's happening, McChesney says, the U.S. government is also tuning out. Regulators let mergers slide under tremendous pressure from the telecommunications and entertainment industries. He notes virtually no one in government is looking out for the public interest in the media field.

To explain their laxity, regulators almost invariably put forward the same answer: the Internet. How can you say there's consolidation, they reason, when there's so much growth on the Net? The Internet upends the rationale for regulating media mergers, McChesney adds, or for regulating media at all.

Once upon a time, the major media conglomerates possessed the only access to millions of Americans. Now, the argument goes, anyone with a few dollars can launch a Web site and compete with the media titans. McChesney wrote last year in *The Progressive* that "proponents of the Internet act as though it is a massive comet crashing into the Earth that will drive media giants into extinction."

It's not happening, he says. The Internet may be changing the nature of the media, but in five years it has yet to produce a competitive marketplace. The dinosaurs still hold all the cards: the programming, the brand names, the advertisers, the promotional prowess and the capital to rule the Internet. By 1999, he writes, "notions of the Internet providing a new golden age of competitive capitalism were quickly fading from view in the business press." Worse, he argues, the Internet is swiftly being co-opted by the corporate communication system.

McChesney says any notion of the Internet as a democratic medium is dubious at best: "A market-driven digital communication system seems just as likely to accentuate widening class divisions as to lessen them."

To many people, McChesney's warnings will sound like predictions of rain in the desert. Indeed, after the recent AOL-Time Warner merger, Time Warner Chairman Gerald Levin told an ABC *Good Morning America* audience that "this is not just about big business; this is not just about money. This is about making a better world for people because we now have the technology and the instruments to do that." Calling the Internet "wildly democratic," Levin said that one of the goals of the new merger is to bridge the so-called digital divide, "to try and make sure that ultimately those who can't afford it can get it."

"There are companies with people inside who really care about using the Internet for social progress," he added. "And that's what we're going to try to do."

About the same time, Viacom Chairman Sumner Redstone told a "town hall" group in Beverly Hills, Calif., that "consumers of entertainment have never had so many choices, and producers and distributors of entertainment have never had so much competition. I believe this is the first of many mergers to come."

Indeed, paradox seems to define our age. But maybe it always has. "Capitalism and democracy are not synonymous," McChesney points out, "nor have they ever been."

He writes: "Capitalism is innately in conflict with the core tenets of democracy. The core reason is that capitalism is invariably a class society where a very small percentage of the population has most of the society's wealth and a disproportionate share of its income."

More people might join the author in a discussion of that dynamic but, he states, the topic "has been decidedly off-limits as a subject in U.S. political debate."

It's as if the paradox no longer exists. It's the best of times. End of discussion. A line from the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects* comes to mind: "The greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing the world he doesn't exist."

Reading McChesney's book, you're reminded that these days conglomeration is not seen as a threat but as a goal, not the province of the elite but the dream of the e-commerce masses. It's the old Horatio Alger story, updated: The wish of almost every small Web businesses is to be affiliated, partnered, consolidated, merged into something greater - and more profitable.

The popularity of that notion makes reform all the more remote a possibility, even for a resourceful old warrior like McChesney. Consolidation is not something that just happens to AOL and Time Warner - to them. It's now something that can happen to you and me, to us.

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*John Fraim is president of the GreatHouse Company, a publisher and consulting firm in Santa Rosa, Calif. - - From The Industry Standard*

#### From the Inside Flap

Robert McChesney argues that the media, far from providing a bedrock for freedom and democracy, have become a significant antidemocratic force in the United States and, to varying degrees, worldwide.

Rich Media, Poor Democracy addresses the corporate media explosion and the corresponding implosion of public life that characterizes our times. Challenging the assumption that a society drenched in commercial information "choices" is ipso facto a democratic one, McChesney argues that the major beneficiaries of the so-called Information Age are wealthy investors, advertisers, and a handful of enormous media, computer, and telecommunications corporations. This concentrated corporate control, McChesney maintains, is disastrous for any notion of participatory democracy.

Combining unprecedented detail on current events with historical sweep, McChesney chronicles the waves of media mergers and acquisitions in the late 1990s. He reviews the corrupt and secretive enactment of public policies surrounding the Internet, digital television, and public broadcasting. He also addresses the gradual and ominous adaptation of the First Amendment ("freedom of the press") as a means of shielding corporate media power and the wealthy.

Rich Media, Poor Democracy exposes several myths about the media -- in particular, that the market compels media firms to "give the people what they want" -- that limit the ability of citizens to grasp the real nature and logic of the media system. If we value our democracy, McChesney warns, we must organize politically to restructure the media in order to affirm their connection to democracy.

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