

News Incorporated: Corporate Media Ownership and Its Threat to Democracy

Elliot D. Cohen, Editor

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The American public knew more about Wynona Ryder's shoplifting trial than it did about the history of U.S. involvement in Iraq. Peter Phillips, director of Project Censored, faults corporate media. He observes that with only a handful of entertainment-oriented mega-conglomerates dominating the industry, real news—informative, comprehensive, objective news—has virtually vanished, making Americans the best entertained, least informed people in the world.

Phillips's observations lead this compilation of essays. The editor is the director of the Institute of Critical Thinking, the editor of the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, and the author of many books on journalism, professional ethics, and philosophical counseling. The collection is a savvy, scathingly critical assemblage of insider commentaries on the current state of American journalism. In his introduction, Cohen proposes that a properly functioning media should act as a fourth branch of government, entrusted with keeping the public informed.

Among the collection's contributors are political analyst Michael Parenti and *Mother Jones* publisher Jay Harris, who address corporate media's failure to meet this responsibility and, worse, its deceptive collaboration with government officials to undermine American democracy. Harris reviews the misleading terms that the Bush administration uses to describe its programs—tax relief, clear skies initiative, and healthy forests—and argues that the media is complicit in the dissemination of those terms. Parenti observes that corporate media frequently accept as given the very policy positions they should critically examine. For example, news coverage of proposed military spending always focuses on how much to increase, not whether to increase at all.

Several essays illuminate the role of the First Amendment in regulation of the media. Cheryl Leanz and Harold Feld perceptively examine the dual role of the First Amendment as first articulated by James Madison. More than a shield protecting individual speech from government censorship, Madison's First Amendment in fact obligates government to regulate speech to ensure that a proper level of public discourse takes place and that powerful speakers are not given undue protection.

Among the recommendations for turning the situation around, several contributors speak to the need to rein in the conglomerates. Mark Cooper advocates a revival of old tools that have fallen into disuse—ownership limits, public interest obligations, expansion of noncommercial media.

While there are glimmers of seemingly unwarranted optimism, these essays generally paint a gloomy picture of the state of the media, one made decidedly gloomier by the results of the 2004 election.

ROB MITCHELL (August 18, 2009)

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