

“The New Communications Cartel” and “Afterword”  
from the Preface to the Fifth Edition of the book  
*The Media Monopoly*  
by Ben H. Bagdikian  
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**Preface**

In the last 5 years, a small number of the country's largest industrial corporations has acquired more public communications power-including ownership of the news-than any private businesses have ever before possessed in world history.

Nothing in earlier history matches this corporate group's power to penetrate the social landscape. Using both old and new technology, by owning each other's shares, engaging in joint ventures as partners, and other forms of cooperation, this handful of giants has created what is, in effect, a new communications cartel within the United States.

At issue is not just a financial statistic, like production numbers or ordinary industrial products like refrigerators or clothing. At issue is the possession of power to surround almost every man, woman, and child in the country with controlled images and words, to socialize each new generation of Americans, to alter the political agenda of the country. And with that power comes the ability to exert influence that in many ways is greater than that of schools, religion, parents, and even government itself.

Aided by the digital revolution and the acquisition of subsidiaries that operate at every step in the mass communications process, from the creation of content to its delivery into the home, the communications cartel has exercised stunning influence over national legislation and government agencies, an influence whose scope and power would have been considered scandalous or illegal twenty years ago.

The new communications cartel has been made possible by the withdrawal of earlier government intervention that once aspired to protect consumers and move toward the ideal of diversity of content and ownership in the mass media. Government's passivity has emboldened the new giants to boast openly of monopoly and their ability to project news, commercial messages, and graphic images into the consciousness and subconscious of almost every American.

Strict control of public information is not new in the world, but historical dictatorships lacked the late twentieth century's digital multimedia and distribution technology. As the country approaches the millennium, the new cartel exercises a more complex and subtle kind of control.

Because each of the dominant firms has adopted a strategy of creating its own closed system of control over every step in the national media process, from creation of content to its delivery, no content-news, entertainment, or other public messages-will reach the public unless a handful of corporate decision-makers decide that it will. Smaller independents have always helped provide an alternative and still do, but they have become ever more vulnerable to the power of the supergiants. As the size and financial power of the new dominant firms have escalated, so has their coercive power to offer a bothersome smaller competitor a choice of either selling out at once or slowly facing ruin as the larger firm uses its greater financial resources to undercut the independent competitor on price and motion. In the process, consumers have become less influential than ever.

Perhaps the most troubling power of the new cartel is its control of the main body of news and public affairs information. The reporting of news has always been a commercial enterprise and this has always created conflicts of interest. But the behavior of the new corporate controllers of public information has produced a higher level of manipulation of news to pursue the owners' other financial and political goals. In the process, there has been a parallel shrinkage of any sense of obligation to serve the non-commercial information needs of public citizenship.

The idea of government interceding to protect consumers is contrary to the ideology of most of the media cartel's leaders, who with few exceptions, pursue the conservative political and economic notion of an uninhibited free market that operates without social or moral obligations.

... earlier, it was possible to describe the dominant firms in each separate medium—daily newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books, and movies. With each passing year ... the number of controlling firms in all these media has shrunk: from fifty corporations in 1984 to twenty-six in 1987, followed by twenty-three in 1990, and then, as the borders between the different media began to blur, to less than twenty in 1993. In 1996 the number of media corporations with dominant power in society is closer to ten. In terms of media possessions and resources, the newest dominant ten are Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation Limited (Murdoch), Sony, Tele-Communications, Inc., Seagram (TV, movies, cable, books, music), Westinghouse, Gannett, and General Electric.

The magnitude of the new media cartel's power is reflected in the simple dollar size of recent transactions that produced it.

At the time of the first edition of this book, in 1983, the biggest media merger in history was a \$340-million matter, when the Gannett Company, a newspaper chain, bought Combined Communications Corporation, an owner of billboards, newspapers, and broadcast stations. In 1996, when Disney merged with ABC/Cap Cities, it was a \$19-billion deal—fifty-six times larger. This union produced a conglomerate that is powerful in every major mass medium: newspapers, magazines, books, radio, broadcast television, cable systems and programming, movies, recordings, video cassettes, and, through alliances and joint ventures, growing control of the golden wires into the American home-telephone and cable.

But the quantity of money involved is the least disturbing measure of events. More ominous is how this degree of concentrated control translates into the power to shape the country's political and economic agendas, to create models of behavior for each generation, and to achieve ever more aggressive, self-serving access to every level of government.

A prime exhibit of the cartel's new political power is the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This act was billed as a transformation of sixty-two years of federal communications law for the purpose of "increasing competition." It was, with some exceptions, largely described as such by most of the major news media. But its most dramatic immediate result has been to reduce competition and open the path to cooperation among the giants.

The new law opened the media field to new competitors, like the large regional telephone companies, on the theory that cable and telephone companies would compete for customers within the same community. In practice, the power of one company in television was enlarged to permit a single firm to reach 35 percent of all American households. The act made it possible, for the first time, for a single company to own more than one radio station in the same market. A single owner was now permitted to own both TV stations and cable systems in the same market. License periods for broadcasters were expanded.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 swept away even the minimal consumer and diversity protections of the 1934 act that preceded it. Though this was an intricate bill of 280 pages that would transform the American media landscape, its preparation and passage did not meet the standards of study and public participation that ordinarily would precede an historic transformation of a major influence on society.

... Of the 1,500 daily newspapers in the country, 99 percent are the only daily in their cities. Of the 11,800 cable systems, all but a handful are monopolies in their cities. Of the 11,000 commercial radio stations, six or eight formats (all-talk, all-news, variations of rock music, rap, adult contemporary, etc.), with an all but uniform content within each format, dominate programming in every city. The four commercial television networks and their local affiliates carry programs of essentially the same type, with only the meagerly financed public stations offering a genuine alternative. Thus, most of the media meet the tongue-twisting argot of Wall Street in J being oligopolies that are collections of local monopolies. This means few choices for citizens looking for genuine differences.

Almost all of the media leaders, possibly excepting Ted Turner of Turner Broadcasting, are political conservatives, a factor in the drastic shift in the entire spectrum of national politics to a brand of conservatism once thought of as "extreme."

... most conservatives consider news bias to be any news that departs from the promotion of conservatism and corporate values.

Domination of corporate values lies behind another profound imbalance in the news. Almost every metropolitan paper in the country has a whole section devoted to "Business," which, with rare exceptions, combines service to financiers

and investors with presentation of corporate leaders as heroes or exciting combatants. There is no such systematic section for consumers, though most of the country's readers are not investors but consumers. When Time Warner and Turner merged, the New York Times devoted a full page to the story, but not one sentence was devoted to what the merger might mean to the national audience of viewers and listeners. "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer," broadcasting's centerpiece of non-commercial news, also ran a major segment on the merger with no mention of its probable impact on the audience.

The daily, even hourly, pursuit of corporate and stock market information by the standard news outlets is in stark contrast to their faint concern with the finances and economics of the majority of American families. From 1987 to 1994, the purchasing power of the minimum wage dropped 35 percent. Only years later when a political battle erupted over a move to increase the minimum wage was there any reporting in the standard news that noted the hardship this represented for the most needful American workers. If the Dow Jones Industrial Average had dropped 35 percent in seven years it would have been an ongoing and urgent issue in newscasts and on page one in newspapers, with insistence that official action be taken.

Another zone of near silence has led to ominous signs in the economy and a threat to social peace. In the United States, maldistribution of income—the growing gap between rich and non-rich—is among the worst among developed countries. Years of systematic silence on the matter in the news media has permitted an accumulation of public distrust, anger, and frustration.

Economist Lester Thurow has said of the widening gap, "Probably no country has ever had as large a shift in the distribution of wealth without having gone through a revolution or losing a major war." But the minimal appearance in the news during the years when this maldistribution was clearly developing has kept both its cause and possible solutions largely invisible - and therefore out of the political arena. As always, the public's lack of good information during a time of duress has led to finding scapegoats, and to increasing domestic right-wing terrorism of a sort once thought limited to the Third World.

In an era of headlines on cutting welfare to the poor, there has been no counterpoint emphasis on the \$86 billion a year in taxpayers' subsidies (welfare) to American corporations, some of which help support the relocation of their operations to other countries, resulting in massive employee layoffs within the United States.

Commercial television broadcasting's treatment of children and their needs continues to be a national disgrace. In 1951, when far fewer television channels existed, there were twenty-seven hours a week of children's programming. By the 1990s, with far more channels, there were only three or four hours a week on all networks.

The role of children in modern commercial television is that of targets—targets for commercials that sell snacks, soft drinks, fashionable clothes, and toys. The idea of the child as future responsible citizen seems not to exist on commercial TV. That role seems to be left to public television, whose appropriations conservatives and commercial interests have done their best to kill, and which in response has itself become dependent upon corporate advertising.

In the reign of the new media cartel, the integrity of much of the country's professional news has become more ambiguous than ever. The role of journalists within news companies has always been an inherent dilemma for reporters and editors. Reporters are expected by the public and by reportorial standards to act like independent, fair-minded professionals. But reporters are also employees of corporations that control their hiring, firing, and daily management—what stories they will cover and what part of their coverage will be used or discarded. It is a harsh newsroom reality that never seems to cause conservative critics to speculate why their corporate colleagues who own the news and have total control over both their reporters' careers and the news that gets into their papers would somehow delight in producing "liberal bias."

The new media conglomerates have exacerbated the traditional problems of professional news. The cartel includes some industries that have never before owned important news outlets. Some of the new owners find it bizarre that anyone would question the propriety of ordering their employee-journalists to produce news coverage designed to promote the owner's corporation.

Seeing their journalists as obedient workers on an assembly line has produced a growing incidence of news corporations demanding unethical acts. There are more instances than ever of management contempt and cruelty toward their journalists.

the daily newspaper business ... remains one of the most profitable in the country. Profit level of daily newspapers is two to three times higher than average profits of the Fortune 500 top corporations, according to John Morton of Morton Research, an authoritative source on newspaper economics. According to Standard and Poor's Media Industry Survey, in 1994, not a banner year in the news industry, the average profit for publicly traded news companies was 20 percent.

Letting advertisers influence the news is no novelty in less respected papers, but in the past it was usually done by innuendo, or quiet editing, reassignment, or firing. It has seldom before been so boldly stated and practiced in ways that typify the new contempt that some news companies feel for the professional independence of their journalists-and for the news audience. The trend typifies a growing attitude that reporting the news is just another business.

Local alternative news weeklies have always been publications that monitor their local dailies and broadcast stations and provide alternative information and opinion. They still do. But even this field has seen the growth of chains, the franchising of weekly papers, and the creeping influence of impersonal corporate management.

Only fifteen years ago, it was possible to cite specific corporations dominant in one communications medium, with only a minority of those corporations similarly dominant in a second medium. Today, as noted, the largest media firms have an aggressive strategy of acquiring dominant positions across every medium of any current or expected future consequence. Known and admired on Wall Street as "synergy," the policy calls for one company subsidiary to be used to complement and promote another. The process has helped produce a quantum leap in the power of a dominant media corporation to create and manipulate popular culture and models of behavior (or misbehavior) - and to use this power for narrow commercial and political purposes.

In 1987, cancellation of the Fairness Doctrine made another new antidemocratic phenomenon almost predictable. Talk radio has become an overwhelming ultraconservative political propaganda - machine. The most influential propagandist, Rush Limbaugh, has nineteen million listeners, and there is no right of reply to his extra-ordinary record of lies, libels, and damaging fantasies.

Almost from the start, national communications law has been based on the concept that the public owns the airwaves. For their part, broadcasters insist on government policing and penalties to prevent unlicensed operators from willingly or unwillingly jamming the frequencies of established stations; otherwise there would be a chaos of static on radio and screens full of "snow" on television. But federal law also mandates that those who hold licenses must maintain local studios and operate "in the public interest" which, given the local nature of studios, has meant significant access to the airwaves by community groups. Holders of broadcast licenses have no right to licenses beyond their term limits and presumably may renew them only if they have fulfilled their community obligations.

Despite the law, in recent years both the major media operators and the Congress have acted as though its "public ownership" phrases are not there or can be safely ignored. The Congress, the White House, and the Federal Communications Commission have steadily relaxed standards to permit the growing exclusion of community voices on the country's 11,000 local commercial radio stations, 1,500 television stations, and 11,800 local cable systems.

There are basic measures to be taken if the public is to regain access to its own media and guarantee choices that have some relationship to the varying needs and tastes of the population. Many of these will require mandatory actions: the broadcast industry has an almost unrelieved history of cynicism and evasion in its promises of self-reform.

## **Proposals**

\* It is time for a new, nonpartisan, nongovernmental commission to study the present and desired future status of the country's media. In 1947, Henry Luce donated the money for the influential Commission on Freedom of the Press, headed by Robert Maynard Hutchins. It dealt with the printed press and gave the country a fresh look at modern needs of news and public information in a democracy. It was important following, as it did, the catastrophes of pre-war dictatorships' controlled media. These were still live memories at a time when most of American news was still strikingly narrow and parochial.

We need a modern commission to examine the more complex and compelling contemporary need-to remind the American public and the media industry itself of the new power of modern media technology and its obligations to democratic life. Such a commission must avoid the flaws of other important study commissions in which industry influence resulted in a final report that was either vague generalities or a watery support of the status quo.

\* The National News Council that existed from 1973 to 1984 is needed today more than ever. Supported by foundations, the Council heard serious complaints about specific cases of national news media performance, studied the known facts with all parties free to be heard, and issued a report in each case. While none of its recommendations were mandatory, it provided the public with a voice and the news media with a forum for the recognition, admitted or not, of existing weaknesses. But when the foundations, after having created the Council and proved its feasibility and need, said it was time for the industry itself to support the idea, as is done in some other democracies, no major media organizations came forward to support the effort, and the Council died. It is worth trying again, now that the public is more aware of problems in the media than it was twenty years ago.

\* The Telecommunications Act of 1996 needs to be replaced by a new law that can begin to break up the most egregious conglomerates, reinstate mandatory local community access, and put teeth in the requirement that stations demonstrate their record of public interest programming when they apply for renewal of their licenses. License challenge procedures have to be made more accessible to civic groups dissatisfied with their local radio and TV broadcast stations. (Networks are not regulated, but their local affiliates are.)

\* Public broadcasting must be financed through a new, nonpolitical system, as is done for the best systems in other democracies. Today, non-commercial broadcasting depends on appropriations by federal and state legislatures that themselves are heavily beholden to corporate interests. A small surtax on all consumer electronic equipment-computers, VCRs, TV and radio sets, and the like-is minuscule at the individual retail level but could provide funding for a full-fledged multi-channel radio and TV non-commercial system, and for a substantial national broadcast news and documentary operation.

Ignored for so long that they now sound radical and remote are earlier proposals for funding public, non-commercial broadcasting. In 1967, a Carnegie Commission proposed a tax on television sets to finance non-commercial television. That year the Ford Foundation financed the Public Broadcasting Laboratory, which paid for an historic and popular one-hour program every Sunday that awakened for many Americans the possibilities that commercial broadcasting lacked.

\* The Federal Communications Commission has succumbed to what seems to be the natural history of too many consumer protection agencies, which over time has been to shift from their original purpose of protecting consumers against unfair or dangerous industry behavior to an opposite role of protecting industries from their consumers. The agency needs to be reconstituted to include specified representatives from nonpartisan groups like the Parent Teachers Association, as well as presidential appointees. It has been a generation since 1961 when the new chairman of the FCC, Newton Minow, startled the convention of the National Association of Broadcasters with the statement that they operated "a vast wasteland" and were "squandering the public airwaves," and warned, "There's nothing permanent or sacred in a broadcast license."

\* The Fairness Doctrine and equal time provisions desperately need to be restored. In 1987 broadcasters promised that their repeal would increase serious public affairs programming. In fact, that kind of programming has been largely abandoned in favor of more advertising and violence. The answer to the Rush Limbaughs is not censorship but a restoration of the public right of timely reply on the stations and at the times the Limbaughs and others now broadcast.

From the inception of commercially licensed broadcasting in 1927, the Fairness Doctrine required broadcasters to devote a reasonable amount of time to discussion of controversial issues of public importance, and to permit reasonable opportunities for opposing views to be heard. It included special provisions to oblige stations to provide reasonable time for response by those attacked in discussions. Beginning in 1979 and continuing through the deregulation campaign of President Reagan in the early 1980s, broadcasters pushed for repeal of these regulations, and for all practical purposes the broadcasters won. An equal time provision in essence said that in the forty-five days before an election, stations must make time available to opposing candidates on roughly the same basis, whether for paid time or public service campaign discussions.

\* End auctioning of broadcast frequencies to stations. The process implies license ownership. The public still owns the airwaves and frequencies should be granted as in the past on credible promises made and kept of public service. Restore local voting on monopoly cable franchises instead of the present backroom deals. Let the FCC or its replacement do what basic public ownership of the airwaves implies-give stations licenses for a limited time, conditional on their general performance as good citizens in their communities.

Make it routine to notify all citizens of local market broadcast license renewals-all stations in a state have their renewal come up in the same year. As that date approaches, existing holders of licenses asking for renewal should be required to show public evidence of what they have done in the past.

\* The country needs easy, inexpensive licensing of low-power, city- and neighborhood-range radio and TV stations. Japan has them and so can the United States. As it is, local communities and ordinary local businesses have been effectively excluded from the air by national broadcasters and advertisers.

\* Paid political advertising should be banned from American broadcasting, as it is in most democracies. In the two months before elections, every station should be required to provide prime time hours for local and national candidates, with fifteen-minute minimums for presentations to avoid the slick sound bite without content that now dominate broadcast election campaigns.

\* Teach serious media literacy in the schools, using independently created curricula. Some already are available and others are being developed. The average American child will spend more time in front of a TV set than in front of a teacher. The young are targets for slick materialism. They need to know how this important element in their lives operates and how it can be analyzed.

\* More citizens need to join and contribute to the various media reform groups like the Cultural Environment Movement, the Center for Media Education, FAIR, and the Institute for Alternative Journalism. There are other groups, but these can lead interested citizens to specific action and to other action groups.

The domination of private money in public politics, which has subverted so much public policy, also prevents legal solutions to problems in the mass media. Most media proprietors show little or no evidence in their programming of any sense of obligation to treat the American audience as citizens of a democracy. Campaign finance reform and media reform are directed at the same societal sickness- the influence of private money that improperly negates civic need and public choice. Linked to the same problem, they have become linked in the ultimate remedy. At stake is the-accountability of politics and with it the media's socialization of American children and the nation's culture.

## **Afterword**

As the world prepares to deal with the twenty-first century, United States society as a whole and the country's mass media find themselves in the same conflict-between what is good for business and what is good for the quality of life in society.

A robust economy and social equity have always been intertwined, and government played an intricate role in the relationship. But in the United States during the decades leading to the millennium, both national politics and most of the country's commercial media have created the notion that social and economic well-being are in a state of conflict.

America's major media are crucial parties to the creation of this artificial conflict. The media do not speak in total unison. Some occasionally present arguments and proposals for a more balanced view. But all are wedded to the ultimate need to satisfy the major source of their income, corporate advertising.

Consequently, corporate decision making is the most powerful single force in socializing and politicizing the American public. Leading corporations own the leading news media and their advertisers subsidize most of the rest. They decide what news and entertainment will be made available to the country; they have direct influence on the country's laws by making the majority of the massive campaign contributions that go to favored politicians; their lobbyists are permanent fixtures in legislatures.

This inevitably raises suspicions of overt conspiracy. But there is none. Instead, there is something more insidious: a system of shared values within contemporary American corporate culture and corporations' power to extend that culture to the American people, inappropriate as it may be.

It is no exaggeration to call the artificial conflict between the need for social equity and a healthy economy, on the one hand, and the corporate world's consistent attack on taxes, on the other, a crisis in American democracy. Taxes are indispensable to support the public institutions that are crucial to social equity, and the corporate world's powerful opposition to such taxes lies at the center of this crisis.

On the national social scene, for example, there is an urgent need for increased funding for public education, including libraries and all the supportive activities on which real education depends. Schools need limits to class size, proper teaching of the arts, and adequate pay for teachers. For a rich country that has the lowest taxes among the industrialized nations but is forever telling its youth that education is the key to success, that is both hypocrisy and a self-imposed crisis.

There is a desperate need for universal decent housing and neighborhoods. Inhabitants of deprived areas suffer high unemployment, and wretched neglect of the governmental services that are required even more than in affluent neighborhoods. Too many of the residents are devastated by drugs and crime. The central solutions to these problems are clear: good education, meaningful employment, and proper housing. But those demonstrated remedies are sidetracked by a national program to build more prisons. That is a crisis.

There is a similarly urgent need for universal health care. The United States is the only developed country in the world without it. A high proportion of the population has no regular access to doctors or clinics. The result is an enormous number of unhealthy citizens, near-epidemic illnesses and malnourishment in the country's poorest regions, and higher costs when some turn in desperation to overburdened emergency rooms. That is a crisis.

Cities are smothering in air pollution, traffic jams, lavish use of fuel resources and a measurable loss of both work and home time because the auto and highway lobbies have successfully defeated support for adequate urban mass transit. Among affluent urban nations the United States is close to the bottom in readily available mass transit. That is a crisis.

Congress once passed a law guaranteeing full employment, but never did much about it. The human, social, and economic damage caused by high levels of unemployment and jobs at poverty-level wages is not a mystery. It is preventable. Yet the country still tolerates shameful rates of unemployment during long periods, and endemic underemployment most of the time. At the same time, the compensation of America's top corporate executives is the highest in the world, and the income gap between executives and their employees is the widest in the world. The corporate sector speaks constantly about the need for U.S. workers to increase productivity, but most citizens are not aware that American workers are already the most productive among industrial countries. Unlike their workers, the high compensation of executives has been proven to have no relationship to the executives' productivity for their corporations, as measured by the standard criteria of business itself. That is a crisis.

Politicians speak constantly of the importance of parents and family in raising each generation of young Americans—and they are correct. But the same politicians refuse to guarantee a living wage for every worker. When both parents need to work outside the home but have no access to affordable, reliable day care, that is a crisis.

Because commercial television is such a powerful socializing force in the country, it is sometimes a more potent influence than parents, schools, and religions. It "educates" each new generation of Americans. Stripped of its public relations pretensions and constant trumpeting of a few benign programs, television remains a national school for crime and aggression. Day and night it demonstrates to children and adults how to kill and maim other human beings, creates an image of a world of ever-present evil and danger, and glorifies violence as the conflict resolution of choice. Alongside this televised curriculum is the teaching of commercials and testimonials that without the correct soft drink, athletic shoes, and clothing, an American child is not socially acceptable. That is a crisis.

Perhaps most dangerous of all are rising levels of cynicism about our own democracy. Citizens are justified in their growing assumption that individual voting means less and less, and that corporate money in politicians' pockets counts more. Buying votes in the Congress and state legislatures is open and lavish. Most voters are disgusted. An appalling number don't bother to vote. That is a crisis.

These are not the issues considered compelling news in the commercial media.

There is no need for our media to become a funereal chorus of impending doom. A better organizing principle was symbolized by the social essayist Life Jensen, in a cartoon of a robed and bearded city prophet carrying a placard reading: "The world is not coming to an end. We will have to learn to cope."

The propagation of unsupported ideas and the avoidance of central issues are characteristic of many media. Some of the illusions they foster also have historical roots. But the chief contemporary culprit is the one most of the American population depends upon for news and a sense of priorities in public life-commercial television.

Resistance to genuine reform in commercial television is rooted in an item of sanctity in corporate life-the seemingly holy creed of a born-again, uninhibited free-market ideology that emerged triumphant in the 1980s and 1990s. It claims that the profit motive producing results every three months should be applied to as much of society as possible. It preaches that the quest for profit should never be restrained by government. The constant iteration that the federal government has few legitimate roles beyond defense has energized efforts to cut tax support for basic social institutions like public schools, libraries, municipal and other governmental services, like retraining the unemployed, and assisting the poor and the elderly.

Sooner or later, the citizens of the country will have to face the crises and make decisions. Unfortunately, based on past performance they can expect little help from their most common source of news and public affairs discussions, commercial television. Instead, the industry continues to create its artificial world designed by the advertising of large corporations.

Deeply involved in its pursuit of maximum profit making without social obligation, commercial broadcasting has worked behind the scenes with its corporate allies to keep non-commercial television at a minimum, or to kill it completely.

There are democratic countries that have demonstrated that business health and social justice need not be at war with each other and that a healthy tax-supported non-commercial broadcasting system can operate side by side with a healthy commercial one. Britain and Germany are examples. But Congress regularly condemns the idea as "socialism" and a heresy against some sacred American business theology.

The desire for reform is not limited to a cultural elite. There is a growing gap between what a majority of citizens have said they want and what television gives them.

Media industry executives insist that their high profits prove that they have met their obligation to the public. Commercial television operators, for example, argue that if American audiences didn't like what they saw, they could simply shut off their sets. The majority of the public does not shut off its sets and the industry continues to make high profits. Therefore, the argument goes, no matter what surveys of public opinion may show, the public is voting with their off-on switches.

It is not an argument that can be dismissed out of hand. The data on audience habits do show massive continued listening and watching. The majority of the audience continues to have television sets in operation about seven hours a day. The difference between what people say they want and what most actually do has the appearance of a paradox. But it is not.

The level of violence on commercial television, for example, remains invulnerable to change, yet the data show that nonviolent programs have 33 percent more viewers than violent ones. A Limes Mirror poll in 1993 showed that 53 percent of Americans want less violence and 80 percent agreed that TV violence is harmful to society. Even the majority of local station managers have said there is excessive violence in the programs networks and syndicators send them-but the same managers make profits by passing on to their local viewers the programs that they and their audience say they do not prefer.

Why the broadcast industry behaves that way is not hard to explain. The necessity of filling as many as fifty channels with eighteen to twenty-four hours a day of programming favors easily duplicated formulas. Though all operators provide the same general content, imitative programming pays. An increase of one percent in the number of households

watching nationwide can give a program's network more than \$50 million in added profit a year. Total advertising revenues remain so huge that even losers in the ratings race make handsome profits.

But that does not explain why the audience at home does not turn off their sets in higher numbers.

The basic answer to the seeming paradox lies in the history of television's original impact on society. When, by the mid-1950s, television sets had become a near-universal appliance in the country's living rooms, they changed more than national entertainment. Television produced a radical transformation in the way American families arranged their lives.

Before television, families typically used after-dinner time to read newspapers, magazines and books, play games, do homework, listen to the radio, gather around the piano to sing songs, or socialize with their friends and neighbors. When they could, parents took the family downtown to a restaurant and a movie.

Compared to the older pattern, mass television was stunningly fascinating, convenient, and inexpensive. Social and after-dinner habits changed rapidly. The downtowns of most cities became wastelands after dark as movie houses and restaurants closed. Their former customers were able to watch movies and live programs on their own small screen in the living room without dressing up, leaving the house, eating dinner in a downtown restaurant, or paying admission to a theater.

It is worth noting, however, that in those formative years that produced such a profound alteration of national habits, mass television was essentially nonviolent. It carried far more pleasant, unaggressive children's programs; it lacked today's endless staccato of commercials, and it was almost entirely family oriented.

With that content, the electronic box became a permanent fixture in the living room and the pattern was established of "free" home entertainment. It is "free" that is, if one does not count the cost of commercials, which is added to the price of products people buy (about \$35 billion a year, or \$350 a year per household). It is free if one disregards the amount of money spent on the goods television advertises most successfully-non-essential, marginal goods promoted through short, emotionally-laden messages. It is free if one ignores the loss of this national spending for central social needs like education and health care.

Once the national habit of staying home to watch free news and entertainment was established, a profound national social pattern was set. But there was an ironic aftermath. As detailed earlier, television emerged as the most powerful merchandising tool in human experience. Progressively, more channels have been added, and with each addition the competition for viewer attention has increased proportionately.

The frantic competition was compounded by what seemed to be an innocent, convenient and simple invention. The hand-held, portable remote-control switch permitted viewers to remain comfortably seated while changing channels. It increased the pressure on broadcasters to fix the viewer's immediate attention by physical melodrama and fast-moving actions. There are golden industry rewards when viewers stop "to see what happens next."

Growing billions in advertising revenues were at stake in keeping the audience transfixed by some compelling action. Imminent murder, flaming car crashes, blazing gunfights, and sexual couplings became money in the bank, or, more likely, in the quarterly earnings on which Wall Street determines the success of broadcasters and their programs.

Government regulation of commercial broadcasting has become an important part of the national debate on the role of government in all of society. Most of the public gets most of its news from commercial television; it is the most common form of entertainment for children and adults. The country would benefit from national news and discussions about the best way to use the airwaves, since the public owns them.

But the record so far shows that the public cannot trust the commercial media to raise the issue, let alone tell them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

In recent years, the protests of parents and educators have grown louder, asking for change in antisocial programming and other inappropriate material for children. But they are faced with new obstacles.

There has been increasing insistence by the corporate world that the free market dogma must prevail with no governmental interference. And the broadcast industry has taken to proclaiming its "First Amendment rights."

The historic, legal and pragmatic truth is different.

In private, few in the corporate world want total fulfillment of their public demand to "get the government out of the way of business." And broadcasting, despite its constant claim, does not have literal First Amendment rights.

Although the simple idea that business practices should be left solely up to business firms is a commonly held one, "public choice in a free market" is not in fact the undiluted goal of all commerce. Few corporate leaders want to fly in an airplane that has not been tested and approved by the government. They do not want their families eating food unprotected from contamination by toxic chemicals. They don't want their seriously ill children taking powerful prescription medicines produced under the free market mantra of "let the buyer beware." Nor would their corporations accept checks drawn on banks that had never been subjected to a government audit.

It is beyond argument that the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution forbids government from abridgment of freedom of the press and of expression. And it is beyond argument that this freedom is crucially important in American democracy. Under the First Amendment, it is unconstitutional for government to require anyone to have a license in order to print or write anything.

When it comes to broadcasting, however, neither law nor history is so simple.

The First Amendment applied to print and speech is close to absolute on grounds that speaking and writing are open to anyone. Anyone can publish criticisms of government and the established press; people and groups (and authors of books like this one) do so constantly. Owning a press is a big advantage, but with all its modern complications in both theory and practice, the First Amendment gives Americans more freedom to speak and publish than do laws and practice in any other major democracy.

But broadcasters do not have the "First amendment rights" that forbid government regulation of writing and printing. In their private and more honest moments, broadcasters know this; it is the commercial broadcasters themselves who insist on government regulation and with good reason.

... in early, unregulated radio after World War I, commercial and amateur operators sent out signals on any frequency they wished. Some poached on the frequency of popular broadcasters, or sent out such powerful signals that they interfered with distant transmitters. The result was a chaos of jamming and static that threatened the entire enterprise and satisfied no one.

It was the broadcasters themselves who demanded that government regulate the industry by granting each operator a monopoly on a particular frequency, and who insisted that government punish anyone who intruded into their channel monopoly. As previously cited, the government has in fact imprisoned and fined citizens who have broadcast without a government license.

In return for this monopoly protection of their frequencies, the Congress insisted that the licensed stations must operate "in the public interest." The government wisely did not define "public interest," but said that during the license period a broadcaster should provide ample news and educational programming, and access to religious and other civic groups. When time came to renew the station's license, the overall record of that broadcaster could be reviewed in a process open to public comment. While public participation in license renewals exists more on paper than in actual practice, it is there for citizens who want to pay the costs of exerting their right.

Even the new Telecommunications Act of 1996, which granted the telecommunications industry most of what it desired, requires operation "in the public interest," but broadcasters have successfully narrowed the meaning of that phrase. ... the Fairness Doctrine once required broadcasters to devote a reasonable time to discussion of controversial public issues, and to permit reasonable opportunities for opposing views to be heard if an adversarial position was presented. Broadcasters pushed for repeal of these provisions and, with their special power within government, they won.

Since the 1980s, the federal government has largely ignored the legal "public interest" requirement and has increasingly adopted for broadcasting the dogma of the free market, endorsing whatever pays the most profit.

... the refusal of the major media properly to address central public concerns has created a crisis in democracy. A public inadequately informed about the substance of the arguments that affect its most important social policies has lost the substance of citizenship rights. If voters do not have easy access to central facts and ideas concerning public issues, voting becomes meaningless. Increasing numbers of voters understand this and are becoming cynical. Cynicism poisons free societies.

That is why when citizens are inundated with frivolous or minuscule fragments of public debate, there are social consequences that go beyond "merely business" or "what pays the quickest cash profit." The most common broadcast news today is either a litany of crime or happy talk about private lives of "personalities," in which the media decide how a "person" becomes a "personality." Or "discussions" of public issues become insult-slashing contests by paid gladiators of the air.

One side effect of this vulgarization of national discourse has been an artificial limitation of choice in the discussion of what roles broadcasting should have in American society. The false limitation can be characterized as The Fallacy of the Two-Model Choice.

One mode of broadcasting is presented as undiluted government propaganda if any tax support is involved. In the rhetoric of commercial broadcasters and their supporters in politics, using taxes to help finance non-commercial broadcasting is equated with dictatorial "government propaganda" and "socialism." The rhetoric offers the examples of broadcasting under Hitler and Stalin.

The alternative model, in the "two-model fallacy:" is presented as the only one acceptable for the United States. In this model, broadcasting is totally commercial and therefore automatically "free and democratic"; there is a minimal place, or no place at all, for non-commercial broadcasting-which leaves the field open solely to corporate control.

The reality, of course, is that there are many other free and democratic models of broadcasting in the world. These exist in minimal degree even in the United States, and they flourish in vigorous fashion elsewhere today. In many democracies, tax-supported broadcasting is not authoritarian, and usually there is a strong parallel commercial system. There are such systems all over the world, many of which provide creative, open access to a wide range of citizens and citizen groups.

In United States congressional and media discussions of how best to use the new and powerful methods of mass communication, however, there is almost total silence about existing alternative systems and continued propagation of the false image of "the two-model choice."

Forgotten except to historians of the media, and sometimes even by some of them, is the irony that in the 1920s, during the early years of widespread broadcasting in the United States, the most common and popular stations were non-commercial ones operated by municipalities, universities, and state public agencies.

Today, the closest the United States has come to a departure from the two-model image is the public broadcasting network and other nonprofit stations. But they live on the knife-edge of unstable political appropriations and conservative attacks. Most stay alive by endless efforts to raise their own money from subscribers, and are forced to run commercials that duplicate those on the commercial stations. As a result, a real spectrum of non-commercial radio and television in the United States has remained skeletal.

Non-commercial broadcast operations in this country consist mostly of National Public Radio, television's Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Pacifica radio stations (a small set of Alternative radio stations), and a variety of stations operating at low power on tiny budgets, usually by a school or other educational institution.

The objection of conservatives to public broadcasting is ideological. There is no practical impact on tax rates or the federal budget. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting obtains less than 14 percent of its money from the federal government, a negligible tiny fraction of one percent of the federal budget. The rest of its funds comes from states, municipalities, commercial support, and voluntary contributions.

When the conservative Congress of 1994 proposed to kill public broadcasting by law, politicians were surprised by a poll commissioned by the Public Broadcasting Service, which found that of those surveyed-Republicans, Democrats, and Independents - 84 percent wanted Congress to increase funding for public television or maintain it at current levels.

The response was not limited to people with high levels of education or "high culture" tastes. The congressional budget-cutters discovered that the children's television program "Sesame Street," for example, is such a beloved American household presence that parents of every political coloration rose up in angry protest at the thought of its loss. Other public programs and documentaries had similar strong support at many levels of society.

In Britain, when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, pressing the conservative ideological drive for maximum privatization, made a similar suggestion for the BBC, there, too, public protest prevented a total turnover to private operators. (Without use of BBC programs, American television would be even more deficient in serious drama than it is today.)

The general public in the United States has received little information either from political debates over broadcasting or from their major media about differing broadcast models in Canada, Britain, the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Japan, and other developed democracies. None of these foreign systems is exactly the same, but they all have stable, copious financing through a variety of plans that provide public access to civic groups with large memberships, and they are usually operated by quasi-trusteeships, supported by financing from fixed taxes.

In Belgium and the Netherlands, for example, civic and other organizations, including 'listener associations,' have guaranteed access to broadcast time based on the size of their memberships.

Within the United States, major foundations, consumer advocates like Ralph Nader, and others have suggested alternatives to the two-model illusion of choice. They have demonstrated, often with carefully evolved plans, that there are tax-supported alternatives appropriate to the United States.

The struggling alternative stations (and the illegal pirate ones) remain lonely voices against the national silence on the many ways broadcasting could develop if we do not have to limit ourselves to choosing between broadcasting that is governmental propaganda and broadcasting as a product designed for maximized corporate profit making.

In the 1995 and 1996 congressional debates and in most major media reporting on the future of American telecommunications, mention of any successful, established, foreign democratic systems was notably absent. Yet ironically, Japan's Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK), which is one of the world's largest non-commercial broadcasting systems, is a United States creation.

Today NHK is a leader in broadcast technology (it was the first to develop high-definition television and direct broadcasting from satellite), and, with the BBC, it is one of two remaining public systems financed by license fees charged like taxes to the public. NHK has multiple channels, with more than 6,000 television stations (some of neighborhood range); 3,000 of these stations are general in content and 3,000 are devoted to education. It operates alongside commercial networks and stations.

NHK was born with a resounding declaration by the American government on the need for non-commercial broadcasting with tax support. After the United States defeated imperial Japan in World War II and reconstituted a new, democratic political system, U.S. authorities insisted that no modern democracy should be without a well-financed, nonpolitical and non-commercial public broadcasting system. But ever since, similar suggestions for the United States itself have been met with hostility in Congress, in commercial broadcasting, and in most mainstream American news.

One result is that American commercial television, which started as inexpensive, nonviolent home entertainment, has become focused almost entirely on merchandising and on catching viewer attention with antisocial violence and indiscriminate, gratuitous sex. ...

As the communications medium the public most depends on, television has become the nation's baby-sitter, chief news source, and ever-present entertainer. When broadcasters and their corporate sponsors fail to deal seriously, fairly, and regularly with the country's urgent issues, in a very real way they are using the nation's own property to rob its citizens of the knowledge necessary to cope with their most urgent needs and challenges.

The public needs a constant reminder:

The airwaves do not belong to the broadcasters. They do not belong to the advertisers. The owners, by law, are the people of the United States.