Global Media and the Social Construction of Unreality

Since the 1980s, large national media corporations located in the first world, mainly the United States, have been expanding globally. This expansion has been accomplished by the penetration of foreign domestic media markets and the purchase of partnerships in local and regional media companies. Both new technologies and global, regional, and bilateral trade agreements have made this expansion possible. Simultaneously, there has been an increasing concentration of ownership in these emerging multi-national media corporations. At the present, about ten media conglomerates dominate the global media market with several dozen smaller media corporations dominating regional markets.[[1]](#endnote-1)1 Both expansion and the concentration of ownership meet the demand of the profit imperative for these corporations and also demonstrate how globalization serves the interests of first world multi-national corporations.

However, in the case of multi-national media corporations, there is something more involved. These corporations are a central component of the globalization process itself through the production, distribution, and exhibition of their media content—entertainment, advertising, and carefully framed and targeted “news” shows. They are the main ideological institution of globalization. As Robert McChesney and Edward Herman say in their book The Global Media:

The global media system is an indispensable component of the globalizing

market economy . . . communication and information provide a large and

growing area of investment . . . (and). . . the global media also provide a vital forum for advertisers and the promotion of demand and consumerist values.[[2]](#endnote-2)2

The multi-nation media corporations will benefit from globalization economically, but also through their entertainment and advertising content, they will create the “subjects” of the new global empire, consumers, and the “reality” that they will desire. The commercial “news” shows will reassure the new global “subject” that all is right with the world of desire and their pursuit of it. They will filter and frame information and ideas so that neither will interfere with this “social construction of unreality.” As McChesney and Herman say, “the global media system has fundamental structural flaws that limit its service to democracy.”[[3]](#endnote-3)3

U.S. Media as the Model for Global Media

It is important to understand the structural flaws of the global media, but it is equally important to understand the specific methods and techniques that will be used by these media corporations to accomplish this social construction of unreality. In order to develop strategies of resistance to these methods and techniques, it is most enlightening to look at the United States; the country where the social construction of unreality has been most successful. In the United States, the broadcast media was given to commercial interests almost immediately upon the recognition by those interests of the efficacy of the newly developed technologies, radio and then television, as media for advertising. Advertisers referred to radio as the technology that “conquered living space” and advertisers referred to television as the “dream machine.”

The gift of the broadcast media to commercial interests had impact on both news and entertainment in the United States. A small public space for non-commercial broadcast news and entertainment was allowed to exist through the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. This act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and ultimately the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), public television, and National Public Radio (NPR) public radio. However, these non-commercial media were never adequately funded, and Congress controlled what public funding there was. Even the inadequate public funding has declined under pressure from conservative legislators, ideologues, and the commercial media. As a consequence, PBS and NPR, which occupy only a single space on the broadcast spectrum in each community, have become dependent on fund raising directed at their largely upper middle class viewers, charitable foundations, and corporate sponsorship (not called advertising in the world of U.S. public media). It is obvious that this could be the model for globalized public media, both news and entertainment, that would be acceptable to global commercial interests. It exists but is limited by funding and ideological constraints, therefore it provides no competition, and no alternative points of view.

Reproducing the media landscape of the United States globally is the obvious goal of commercial global media. And that landscape is what Ben Bagdikian calls a media monopoly; it is a fait accompli with only the final boundaries yet to be drawn. As this article is being written, the new Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Kevin Martin, is pushing for further deregulation. The result of this would be the creation of media monopolies in municipalities. Under the proposed new regulations, cross ownership of media within a city would be allowed. A city could become a Time-Turner-Warner or a Newscorp city with the media conglomerate controlling radio, television, and newspaper media outlets. It would be a twenty-first century example of the company town.[[4]](#endnote-4)4

In an early edition of his book Media Monopoly, Bagdikian says that fifty U.S. media corporations controlled almost all of U.S. media. In a more recent edition, he says that eight media corporations control almost all of U.S. media. This concentration of ownership also exists in all mass media in the United States. Television, film, radio, book publishing, music, and newspaper ownership are more concentrated than ever before and the trend is for increasing concentration of ownership. For example, six corporations control film production, all “Hollywood” based corporations. Five corporations dominate television production, distribution, and exhibition. Radio is dominated by Clear Channel which owns more than twelve hundred stations and by Viacom (one of the corporations that dominate the film and television industry). Book publishing and music are dominated by only a few media corporations. And eighty per cent of newspapers in the United States are owned by corporations (immediately after WWII, 80 per cent of newspapers were privately owned), and only one per cent of news papers have competition.[[5]](#endnote-5)5 Just recently, the Tribune Company, a giant, but second tier, media conglomerate, purchased the Los Angeles Times and now owns the Chicago Tribune, Hartford Courant, and the Orlando Sentinel, along with a dozen smaller newspapers. Cable and satellite delivery systems are dominated by the same media conglomerates who dominate the production and distribution of content in other media, either through ownership or shared ownership.[[6]](#endnote-6)6

Although monopolies have been illegal in the U.S. since the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, shared monopolies, four or fewer corporations controlling over half of an economic market, exist in most U.S. media. These shared monopolies are not illegal but function much the way that monopolies do. And the same media conglomerates are most often the same partners in shared monopolies in other areas of media. An example is Time-Turner-Warner-AOL. It is part of both the television and film shared monopolies, part of the music recording and book publishing shared monopolies, and it owns three of the magazines with the largest circulation in the United State. These media conglomerates are integrated both vertically and horizontally. An example is Disney. It is part of the television and film shared monopolies and it owns theme parks, retail stores, and sports franchises. Each of these venues can be a means for expanding marketing strategies and increasing sales for Disney’s television and film content.[[7]](#endnote-7)7

The profit imperative demands expansion so that media content can both reach a wider audience of consumers and also can be distributed throughout the conglomerate’s media outlets (synergy). And the profit imperative demands increasing concentration of ownership; the top three largest media corporations are significantly more profitable than the next three corporations.[[8]](#endnote-8)8 While the profit imperative drives the media conglomerates, the political system in the U.S. has created the legal and regulatory environment that allows them to do so.

The public policies that were most decisive for creating the environment for a media monopoly in the U.S. were enacted during the Reagan Administration. The Reagan administration professed an ideological commitment to the principles of the free market. Its policies, though, were only consistent with its principles in regard to the poor, labor organizations, and to deregulation. One industry that the Reagan administration deregulated was the film industry. The Reagan Justice Department vacated the consent decree gained from the movie industry. The decree was derived from an anti-trust suit brought by the U.S. government against the film industry in the late 1940s (originally brought in the late 1930s). The suit was US v Paramount Pictures, *et al*. In the suit the Truman Justice Department argued that the film industry dominated by five Hollywood film companies (called “the studio system”) was engaging in predatory monopolistic practices with its policies of blind and block booking of films. This was a policy that made movie exhibiters accept movies that they had not viewed, blind booking, and accept a group of films, some of which the exhibiters may have not wanted, block booking. In the consent decree the movie industry agreed to stop the practices and also to give up ownership of its own movie theaters. The result of the suit and the decree was not only to end the practices of blind and block booking but the break up of the vertical integration of the studio system. The result of the Reagan Justice Department’s vacating the consent decree was the reverse; it allowed the movie industry to be integrated again into a shared monopoly of production, distribution, and exhibition.[[9]](#endnote-9)9

While the above policy of deregulation affected entertainment media and ultimately its content,[[10]](#endnote-10)10 another Reagan policy had an affect on “news” in the U.S. This was the administration’s elimination of the Fairness Doctrine. The doctrine had been adopted as a formal rule in 1949 by the FCC and then in 1959 Congress made it a law. It reads: “A broadcast licensee shall afford reasonable opportunity for discussion of conflicting views on matters of public importance.” The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the doctrine in 1969 in Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC, 1960. The Court decision was based on the First Amendment and the fundamental right of the people to have access to an “uninhibited marketplace of ideas.” As Steve Randall at Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting has pointed, the two requirements of the doctrine were that a broadcaster devote some air time to discussing controversial matters of public concern and that the broadcaster air contrasting views regarding those controversial matters.[[11]](#endnote-11)11 The elimination of the Fairness Doctrine has had significant negative consequences for democracy in the United States, but it has had significant positive consequences for commercial “news” and broadcast “journalism” in the United States. The emergence and domination of commercial radio frequencies by very profitable right wing talk radio has been one consequence. The other consequence has been the complementary emergence of six twenty-four hour news channels governed by no fairness rules.

The most significant legislation for deregulating media however was passed during the administration of a Democratic president, Bill Clinton. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 was presented to the public as a necessary revision of the 1934 Communications Act. Advocates claimed that it would allow for more competition and create the environment for the development and dissemination of new technologies. In reality the Act restructured the media landscape for the benefit of commercial media interests, broadcasters, cable companies, and telecommunication companies.[[12]](#endnote-12)12

Along with legislative deregulation, there has been the transformation of the Federal Communications Commission’s regulatory function, or at least a reemphasis. The FCC, originally the Federal Radio Commission, was created as part of the Radio Act of 1927. Its mandate was to regulate the airwaves in the public interest and create an environment for commercial interests to be profitable. Michael Powell, the first Chairman appointed by George W. Bush, emphasized the latter function of the agency. An example of the FCC under Powell’s Chairmanship is the FCC ruling in 2003 which, despite overwhelming public protest, further deregulated the industry.[[13]](#endnote-13)13 The new Chairman of the FCC, George W. Bush’s second appointee, Kevin Martin, as mentioned earlier, is pushing the policy of deregulation even further.

Advertising: The Social Construction of Unreality

The commercial media in the United States is highly concentrated, dominates all media, and is arguably free of regulatory constraints. This makes it free to pursue a profit imperative. The customer of the commercial media is not the viewer, or the reader, but the advertiser. A consequence of profit, concentration, expansion, domination, and no regulation of commercial media has been the saturation of cultural space in the United States with advertising. The goal of commercial media is to provide the audience for advertisers, therefore commercial media, entertainment and news, is primarily a means of distributing advertising. Over one-fourth of television and radio time is appropriated for advertising. Newspaper and magazine space is over one-fourth advertising. At the movies, advertising now precedes the showing of movies, as does a seemingly endless stream of promotions, called previews, for future movies. The technique of product placement allows products to be advertised in the movies themselves; and a mention of the desirable characteristics of the product may be written into the screenplay. Advertising is on buses, taxis, billboards, stadiums, blimps, and it is pulled by airplanes; logos are placed on private vehicles; slogans are written in the sky; commercials are the subject of conversation. It is in schools, hospitals, and public buildings. It is everywhere, and it is accepted, or more accurately experienced, as a natural phenomenon, rather than a humanly constructed one. This is the sign that victory is complete; the “ism” that won the century has consolidated its victory by making itself visible to all who can see, and making itself heard to all who listen. The “ism” is consumerism, and it is necessary for consumerism to conquer global cultural space the same way that it has conquered cultural space in the United States for globalization to realize its goals.

Consumerism is more than consumers buying things and advertising does more than sell things; it is the main institution for creating “subjects” and the “reality” that they desire. The “subjects” and their “reality” are opposite sides of the same coin. Together they constitute a totalizing world view, a way of life that marginalizes or eliminates other possibilities. This way of life is organized in such a way that high level and continuous consumption is the dominant norm, and as the dominant norm, it is the activity around which all of life is arranged. Therefore the primary social role is that of consumer; the role of worker and wage earner is a subordinate but necessary role in that it, along with debt, allows the subject to keep consuming. And freedom is the dominant value in this world view, but redefined as the freedom to consume.

The social construction of consumerism actually began in the United States in the 1920s when the economic and political elite realized that the newly developed process of mass production, Fordism, demanded the mass production of consumers. The result of this realization was an organized plan to transform the domestic population into consumers; this was called the Gospel of Mass Consumption.[[14]](#endnote-14)14 A political ideology based on the same assumptions complemented this plan. Walter Lippman, the preeminent political theorist of the time, argued that a technical elite made up of social scientists needed to govern the American democracy, because the public was incapable of the rationality required to govern itself. He characterized the public as the “bewildered herd.” The emphasis on the social construction of consumerism would prove beneficial to both economic and political elites. American society, from this point of view, would henceforth be made up of consumers whose lives would be organized around the continuous consumption of things while a technocratic elite made their political decisions for them.[[15]](#endnote-15)15

During this time, new techniques for creating consumers and shaping their desires were developed. Early advertising had assumed that people were rational and that they could make rational decisions about their needs. Advertisements appealed to this, albeit not without deception. The new techniques that were developed by advertisers were based upon new assumptions. Some were derived from the newly emerging field of psychoanalysis and some were derived from the field of collective behavior. The new assumptions were that people were motivated by the unconscious and that appeals to the unconscious were the best way to sell products but also the best way to transform the public of mass societies into consumers. Increasingly commercial interests used emotionally charged and value laden images in its advertisements to create the world of desire.

The new techniques of advertising combined with the emergence of television, the dream machine, in the 1950s expanded the possibilities and scope of consumerism. Television assumed a central place in the home of most Americans by the mid-1950s; as it did, advertising became one of the most important institutions in American society. The number of television sets in the United States grew astronomically once their commercial value was discovered, and the amount of television advertising in time and investment increased tenfold.[[16]](#endnote-16)16

There has been a significant change in the social construction of consumerism in the last three decades. The world of desire has changed. In the 1950s the world portrayed on entertainment television and in television commercials was the middle class world of the new suburbs. Fifty million white middle class and upper middle class Americans fled the urban area to the suburbs in order to become “neighbors” with the families of the prime time domestic situation comedies. The world of desire was a middle class world, a ranch home, two new cars, a lawn, a black kettle barbeque in the back yard, and in some instances a small swimming pool with a diving board. The “Joneses” – middle class families in middle class suburban neighborhoods- were the objects of desire. “Keeping up with the Joneses” was the demand that this world of desire placed on the new consumers.

The world of desire is quite different at the turn of the century; it consists of what Juliet Schor calls the “new Joneses”; these new Joneses are not living in a middle class suburban community. When one looks closely, one finds that they are living in an exclusive community that is more likely gated than integrated by race or class, or they are more likely living in even more exclusive urban environment. This new world of desire is upper middle class, and quite often upper class. Schor has tracked this new world of desire in her book The Overspent American. It still includes back yard barbeques and swimming pools, but they only partially resemble those objects of desire in the 1950s. According to Schor, the social construction of consumerism has created a psyche that while it sleeps, dreams about things that it wants to buy, always has something in mind that it wants to buy, and has a wish list so exotic that only a small per cent of the population could ever acquire what was on it.[[17]](#endnote-17)17 This “desiring American” is the perfect subject for commercial interests, eternally desiring, but never finding fulfillment, and experiencing itself as free. This is the dream of globalization and the necessity; three billion “subjects” dreaming the dreams of the advertising industry and calling it freedom. But to make sure reality, visions of the victims of globalization, the hungry, the sick, the cluster bombed, do not interrupt, the commercial media must control the “news.” Again, the United States can serve as the model for global commercial interests.

U.S. “News” and “Journalism”: A Global Model

The commercial media is the dominant providers of news in the U.S. And under U.S. law public corporations have an obligation to maximize profit for shareholders. The result of corporations driven by the profit imperative and dominating the news has transformed the news and journalistic practices in the United States. The results of the transformation have been the blurring of the line between entertainment and news as commercial news seeks to attract viewers for their customers, the advertisers. It also involves the presentation of news that targets a “quality audience” (consumers) and creates a congenial environment for that audience’s viewing of the advertisements. And it involves the adoption of cost cutting measures. These measures include firing reporters and support staff, closing news bureaus, and limiting the amount of time that can be spent on stories. Simultaneously, there has been an expansion of television news shows; there are now five 24 hour commercial news channels. Under this structure, commercial “news” in the U.S has become “infotainment”; it has become dependent on access to elite sources and material from both the government and private interests; and it has adopted a journalistic practice of disinformation, called “balance.”

“Infotainment” has been the product of this blurring of the line between news and entertainment and the result are news shows that emphasize violence, natural disasters, and celebrities. Television news directors admit to following an imperative, “If it bleeds it leads.” This leads to an emphasis on the coverage of violent crime, or street crime. These crimes include murder, rape, “home invasions” (formally burglary, the preference is obvious). Excluded from coverage is the violence of war, or the violence of corporate crime. In his book Culture of Fear, Barry Glassner points out that media coverage of violent street crime may increase as crime itself actually declines.[[18]](#endnote-18)18

Studies have shown that this emphasis on violent crime has a negative impact on American society. Heavy television viewers develop a psychology in relation to the media created fear of violence. They tend to be anxious, angry, and afraid. They are more likely to buy a gun, turn their house into a fort, buy an alarm system, and buy a guard dog. This “unreality” of violence also has anti-democratic consequences as fearful and uninformed citizens are more likely to support harsher punishments, fewer constraints on police, and more money for the criminal justice system.[[19]](#endnote-19)19 Because it is not as “entertaining,” and because it would require time (cost), the commercial media excludes from its coverage of crime such important issues as long term trends in crime. It fails to explore correlations between poverty, lack of education, unemployment and street crime. The commercial media also does not cover the increasing cost of the criminal justice system and how it impacts the funding of education. Beyond the boundaries of the commercial media’s coverage of crime, for obvious reasons, is any examination of the systemic nature of corporate crime, and its violence towards individuals and whole communities.

The commercial media further “infotains” it viewers with coverage of natural disasters, tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods. However, the natural disaster which lends itself to infotainment coverage the best is the hurricane. This is because an entire televised drama can be built around the hurricane. The commercial media can use its increasingly sophisticated technology to identify a “developing” storm somewhere in an ocean. As the storm becomes more intense and its course can be identified, “journalists” are sent to targeted areas to assess the pre-disaster situation. When the hurricane approaches, the “journalists” stay long enough to “infotain” the American viewers with such “newsworthy” insights as how windy a hurricane is. After the hurricane passes, the “journalists” return to the devastated area seeking personal interest stories.

Just how dangerous infotainment coverage can be was revealed in the commercial media’s coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent humanitarian disaster. The commercial media covered the catastrophic event as if the most important news was the “wide-spread collective violence.” In order to cover the disaster in this way, the media accepted totally unverified claims and ignored eyewitness accounts by their own “on the spot journalists.” But the media did not just repeat unsupported claims; it used its outlets as an echo chamber. An example was Matt Lauer persisting in the questioning of the commander of the National Guard about “rules of engagement.” The fact is that none of the claims about violence were true, but this is only one part of the problem of infotainment, the other part, pointed out previously, is that the infotainment has consequences. With Hurricane Katrina, the social construction of unreality, was one of the factors that kept help from reaching stranded victims of the disaster.[[20]](#endnote-20)20

News as infotainment reaches its nadir, though, with the coverage of celebrities.

One study claimed that after the death of Anna Nicole Smith over one half of live television news coverage was focused on the “event.”[[21]](#endnote-21)21 The fickleness of this practice of celebrity as “news” was revealed when the “story” of Anna Nicole was bumped unceremoniously by the important story of Paris Hilton’s arrest, conviction, and sentencing for a reckless driving. Hiltons re-arrest and re-incarceration for violating her probation was covered extensively, as was the day of her release, including what she had for dinner. Hilton was subsequently banished from the headlines by Lindsey Lohan, but only temporarily. “Journalists” had discovered that Hilton had been wearing a fashionable item from the new Paris Hilton collection when she “walked” from jail, so the commercial news media repeatedly played the “walk”. Some might say that Americans are getting what they want, but that assumes a concept of freedom that is so diminished that it is without meaning. The question might be, how can those living in a media saturated environment dominated by large commercial media corporations which themselves are dominated by even larger advertisers be said to be choosing anything?

Another consequence of the news being dominated by the commercial media is the dependent relationship the commercial has with those persons in power. That which becomes essential for commercial news within this structure of dependency is access to those persons, but also the commercial news media has become dependent on press releases, news conferences, and public relations material (VNRs). Those in power have been aware of this dependency since the Reagan administration and take advantage of it in a variety of ways, ways the shape the delivery of what is called “hard” or “political” news in the United States.

Broadcast journalists do not report; they interview or moderate. To do either, they need what is called access to those in power. A certain set of rules follows, do not be hostile to the guest, or even too aggressive, do not be prepared, and do not ask the “wrong” questions. If a journalist violates any of these rules, further access to the person and others may be denied. This system of reciprocity, access and dependency, makes commercial news a congenial environment for those in power to present their agenda.

A perfect example of this was Dick Cheney’s frequent visits to Tim Russert’s Meet the Press, NBC News flagship “hard” news show. During the trial of Scooter Libby, former Cheney Chief of Staff, for obstruction of justice a memo was released. It revealed that Cheney liked to be a guest on Russert’s show because as the memo put it, Cheney usually got his point across.

As mentioned earlier, administrations and powerful interest groups have been aware of this dependent relationship since the Reagan administration and have learned to take advantage of it in other ways than controlling access. One way is the careful framing of “talking points” and then the transmission of those talking points via news conferences and press releases. The “talking points” then become the news as they are reproduced as headlines and leads. Subsequently, they determine the interviews and panel discussions that make up the majority of non-advertising time on the twenty-four hour news channels. Studies by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting have shown that guests/experts on television news, panels, including public broadcasting, are predominately from administrations, corporations, and the military.[[22]](#endnote-22)22

Private corporations also understand this dependency relationship, and hire public relations firms to create what are called video news releases, or VNRs. Then the public relations firms submit these “fake” news stories to commercial news outlets who then use them as if they were real news. In Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy, Robert McChesney says that anywhere between 40% to 70% of news is from press releases and public relations material.[[23]](#endnote-23)23

There are occasions when the commercial news cannot avoid examining an important and controversial issue. For these occasions it has developed a new journalistic practice called “balance.” The proponents of balance, including many broadcast “journalists,” claim that it is the best way to be objective. This so called objectivity involves the journalist assuming the role of moderator and inviting guests from both sides of an issue to be on the news show in order to present their positions. The function of the journalist/moderator within this practice is to follow the above rules so that each side gets to speak. A critique of this practice was depicted on the Peabody Award winning Daily Show, a comedy show that is a satire of commercial television news shows. John Stewart, the fake anchor, asks his fake reporter, Rob Corddry, why there is a debate in the media over John Kerry’s war record. Stewart says that it is in the official documents and it is based on incontrovertible facts. Coordry replies that those incontrovertible facts are one side of the debate. Stewart replies that those are the facts, that’s the end of the debate, what do you think? Coordry replies that as a journalist he is not supposed to think, or in this case, it is not his role to determine what is creditable and what is not. As he says, “It is not in my place to get in the way of the people talking and the people listening.”[[24]](#endnote-24)24

The practice of balance conforms to a narrow concept of objectivity, does not lead to any illumination about the truth, and gives credibility to positions which may not deserve them. An example of thes is the coverage by the commercial media in the United States of the serious problems that humanity faces as a result of global warming. The commercial media does not deal with either the problems or possible solutions but treats the reality of global warming as if it were questionable, a subject for debate. Individuals and groups with serious conflicts of interest and no scientific standing are invited to present their side (usually Exxon Mobil’s) on both commercial and public broadcast news shows. In fact, in peer reviewed scientific studies there is no debate about the reality or causes of global warming.[[25]](#endnote-25)25 And beyond the bounds of corporate news is the connection between consumerism and global warming, or the connection of consumerism to other environmental problems.

The “success” of these techniques and structural determinates and their efficacy as a model of “news” for global economic interests can be seen in their coverage of the United States war against Iraq. The commercial media’s dependence on access, its dependence on press releases and news conferences for “war news,” and its presentation of war as infotainment have been successful in creating an unreality for the American public.[[26]](#endnote-26)26 Knowledge based surveys showed that by as late as December 2006 almost half of the public that was surveyed believed that Saddam Hussein was directly responsible for the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centers in New York, and an almost equal per cent believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq by the U. S. military. Neither claim is true.

Strategies of Resistance

Two philosophical assumptions must underlie any attempt to formulate strategies of resistance. The first assumption involves the concept of power. Power has historically been conceived of as being coercive. This concept of power assumes that force (violence) and propaganda (lies) are necessary to control autonomous subjects. As Michelle Foucault has argued, a modern concept of power must take into account the new technologies of power and the power to create compliant subjects. The mass media uses propaganda, but it is not simply the power to lie that it possesses; it is the power to create subjects who do not need to be lied too, and to create the reality that they desire. These “subjects” experience their desire as natural, and understand freedom as their pursuit of that desire. Consequently, they are easily lied to.

The second assumption involves the concept of a democracy. A democracy can only function as a democracy, self-government by the people, if the people have the information and broad range of ideas necessary to make informed decisions. The media is essential to this end, and to this end the airways must belong to the people.

Given these two assumptions, progressive movements and newly emerging popular governments must have as a central policy the creation of a viable, vital, and independent public broadcast media. In order to do so, it must find ways to make the public media self-sustaining, relevant, and immune from ideological and commercial constraints. A system of adequate and consistent funding must be developed so that journalistic practices relevant to the functioning of democratic societies can be maintained. The system of funding must also be adequate and consistent for the production of non-commercial entertainment. The development of low watt radio stations should be an integral part of any public media. Low watt radio stations have a limited range but low start up costs. This means that local groups such as churches, universities, and civic organizations could produce media content relevant for their neighborhoods.

Secondly, each country should establish a regulatory agency that has the power and resources to enforce media regulations in the public interest. The regulatory agency in the United States, the FCC, serves as a counter example. The five members of the commission are appointed by the President of the United States, three are from the party of the administration including the Chairman. They are political appointees who serve the interests of their political patrons. Also the budget of the FCC is determined by Congress on an annual basis. And the power of enforcement is limited by legislative threat to the budget, ideological constraints, and inadequate regulatory statutes.

It seems clear that a regulatory agency has to be autonomous, that is not constrained by funding, politics, or ideology. It also has to have the majority of its members from public interest organizations; it has to have a budget adequate for regulation and enforcement; and it has to have a clear mandate regarding its function. The mandate cannot include the contradictory function of creating a congenial profit-taking environment for commercial interests.

Advertising needs to be contained; it is already expanding globally. Still, a twofold approach needs to be undertaken. The first approach would be limiting advertising that targets children. Targeting children is the primary way that commercial interests produce subjects; advertisers use sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists to learn how to transform the “inquisitive child into an acquisitive adult.” As Eric Schlosser points out, advertisers have discovered that children can be branded as young as the age of two.[[27]](#endnote-27)27 The second approach would be to introduce media literacy into the educational system. Children are spending more and more time with all forms of media, and are well informed about how to use it, what Aristotle called “techne” and the form of knowledge that he gave the lowest place to in his hierarchy of knowledge. Children and adolescents, however, remain uninformed about the social, political and economic implications of the expanding media culture.

The commercial media has already responded to efforts to protect children. Some of the toughest anti-child advertising regulations have been overturned because they were determined by global trade regulatory institutions to have violated international trade agreements. As a consequence, the effected governments chose to eliminate the regulations rather than face economic penalties in the form of fines or sanctions. Commercial interests in the United States have taken a different approach; they claim that any constraints on advertising are constraints on the corporate right of free speech. In the United States, corporations have gained the status of legal persons, mainly by legal rulings based on the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. This Amendment was ratified to protect black Americans from states denying them their right to life, liberty, and property; however it has been used many more times to guarantee corporations their right of profit. These legal decisions have established corporations as persons. Because corporations are persons within the meaning of the law, they can claim that limits on advertising are limit on free speech. It is obvious that corporations are not persons and advertising is not speech. Legislation codifying the obvious might be a possible strategy of resistance.

The author is somewhat doubtful, but hopeful, that these strategies of resistance might prove helpful in the battle against globalization. However, there are several other possibilities that might allow for some hope. The global media may meet challenges in the global construction of reality that it did not meet in the United States. For example, the educational system in the United States functions in an almost complementary way to the commercial media. From corporate sponsored educational supplements for grade schools to Channel One for high schools to the branding of universities, advertising has penetrated the educational system in the United States. An educational system does not have to allow this to happen and in many countries it does not.

Also Americans, as a public, may be more susceptible to lies because of a cultural phenomenon called “Americanism.” Americanism involves the acceptance of conventional wisdoms about the nature of American society that are never questioned by the majority of the population and as such they provide a kind of protection against “reality.” And lastly, in the United States, television was in almost every American home by the end of the 1950s. This made every family vulnerable to advertising and to commercial “news.” This will never be the case globally; because of the nature of globalization, its structural inequality, there will always be several billion people, expendable, non-consumers, beyond the reach of the global media. Perhaps these people are the real hope.

1. 1 McChesney, Robert W. Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Policy in Dubious Times. New Press: New York, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Herman, Edward and Robert W. McChesney. The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism. Cassell: London, 1999. P. 189

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
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