

The “Brave New World” of American Media

An Interview with Mark Crispin Miller

by Michel Allner and Divina Frau-Meigs

*Professor Mark Crispin Miller has been teaching in the well-known Writing Seminars at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, since 1982, and will shortly be moving on to the department of culture and communications at New York University. His research on American media (press, television, cinema) has concentrated on the way in which the media represent the world. The titles of his recent books illustrate the engaged stance he takes toward the media: *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988); *Seeing Through Movies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990). *Mad Scientists* will be published by W. W. Norton in 1998.*

*Professor Miller is known internationally for a series of articles that appeared recently in *The Nation*, in which he denounced the consolidation of multimedia consortiums in the United States and elsewhere. He pointed out the important control that a small number of conglomerates exert over news distribution and book publishing. According to him, the “megamergers” of recent years among media companies threaten the principle of objectivity in the press and the possibility of the diffusion of diverse points of view to the public.*

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Mark Crispin Miller, could you tell us a little bit about yourself, about your interest in the media? I understand you started with *English Studies*?

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Yes, in the seventies I was a graduate student in English at Johns Hopkins, specializing in the Renaissance literature. I wrote my dissertation on “courtliness”—that is, the quality of “sprezzatura” as both an aesthetic ideal and a social tactic throughout early modern Europe. The text on which I concentrated mainly was *The Book of the Courtier*—Castiglione’s *Il Cortigiano*. It’s a project I plan to return to by and by. Anyway, while working on my graduate degree in Renaissance literature I was also, on my own, writing on the media for magazines aimed at a wider audience. So I had an oddly bifurcated resumé. On the one hand, I was working on film and advertising and campaign propaganda, and, on the other hand, writing for *Milton Studies* and teaching Shakespeare and John Donne.

Anyway, to make a long story short, while teaching at Penn—my first job—I had a chance to join the English faculty at Berkeley. But they made it clear to me that while they rather liked the work that I was doing on the media, they did see it as secondary, and hoped that I would finally concentrate on literary studies. So fate seemed to be inviting me to make a change. Instead of going to Berkeley, then, I went back to Hopkins, to teach not in English but in the Writing Seminars, where, as a specialist in “non-fiction,” I could write anything I liked. So I was now free to write about the media primarily. It was, for me, a liberation. I always have preferred a public to a purely academic audience. To bring the story up to date: this coming spring, I’ll be going to NYU to join that merry group—Neil Postman, Todd Gitlin, Herb Schiller—in Culture and Communications.

In one of your writings, you give an anecdote which shows how, in the 1970s, most academics really didn’t take media studies very seriously.

When we graduate students were about to finish up and look for jobs, we each had to have our letter of inquiry checked out by the director of graduate studies. He read mine through and said, “Fine, fine. You know, it’s always good to have a serious subject and also have some bullshit on the side.” I couldn’t believe it: “‘Bullshit?’” “Yeah, you know: film studies, feminism, children’s lit. On the side.” It was actually Stanley Fish who said that. This was before he became a public champion of political correctness, and would tend to speak more candidly about his ideology. I was shocked, because I really took film studies seriously.

In Boxed-In, you describe television as an environment, as a culture, as a language and, in some respects, your approach seems somewhat McLuhanesque: you analyze the programs and the ads in great detail, but you also talk about "Big Brother," and in fact you end up saying that Big Brother is not the television but the viewer, because he's watching television. Now, everybody agrees that there is a tremendous psychological and social impact of television on American society, and I think a lot of people would agree that McLuhan provided the most global perspective on the media. Incidentally, he also started in English studies... Perhaps he asked the right questions even though very few people today would agree with his answers. So, in your opinion, was McLuhan a crucial agenda-setter for media studies in the 1960s, and what's left of that today?

If my work resembles or recalls McLuhan's work in any way, it would probably be his early book *The Mechanical Bride*, in which he takes a critical view of the media, a view which he seemed to move away from, primarily for rhetorical reasons. If you read his letters, you can't help but be struck by their frequent despairing tone vis-à-vis the media, while his most popular writings had that wackily euphoric quality, suggesting that he's celebrating the arrival of a Brave New World. Now, someone as steeped as he in canonical literary traditions couldn't help but be somewhat frightened at the impact of the electronic media. I think that his instincts were really profoundly conservative, but then he figured out the right tone for the popularization of his work.

If there's one thing that McLuhan does wrong, if I may put it that way, it's his representation of all human history as a mere series of responses to the various sensory categories of media. It's a deterministic reading. If you make the influence of the electronic media sound wholly emancipatory, then that determinism can appear to be a great release, and that would obviate the need for any kind of democratic participation—or, indeed, for any political questions whatsoever. So, while I admire *The Mechanical Bride*, I find myself a bit more wary in my admiration of the later work. What's impressive, of course, is the global reach of his theory and his vast eclecticism. I don't think it often makes a whole lot of sense, and if you really try to grasp it rationally, you can't. But I think that that's partly a reflection of his dodging and weaving around the question of his own real feeling about what was going on.

I agree about The Mechanical Bride. Everybody always points to Understanding Media because of this "medium is the message," but in fact The Mechanical Bride draws very perceptive connections between

corporate and military needs, between the corporation and the world of advertising.

Absolutely. In fact, it may be the most revealing aspect of his career and his legacy that only the later books remain in print while *The Mechanical Bride* is a collector's item—out of print. It's an amazing book, but it's too hard, I mean in the right sense, whereas the later books are written in the quasi-mystical language of advertising copy. They're gnomic and euphoric, a sort of holy writ that invites us to pore over them, but that finally has us feeling good about the system. Those books you can find anywhere, in paperback.

His later books have also had a major impact on the media industry, on its producers...

Not only has he been used, but I think the entire tradition of critical discourse that he fathered, directly or indirectly, continues to exert a tremendous impact. Young film-makers, for example—whether they're making actual movies or TV commercials—are now quick to use the jargon of post-modernism, invoking 'the iconic' or 'the image' to justify this sort of banality. McLuhan was, as it were, the prophet of this sort of academic/journalistic cant. The cult of Quentin Tarantino would be unthinkable without it.

In order to understand the real ideological thrust of this discourse, one need only reconsider Richard Nixon's team of image-makers back in 1968. If you read *The Selling of the President* by Joe McGinniss, you'll find that Nixon's people were quite excited by McLuhan's message. And, in fact, when Richard Nixon played the piano on the Jack Parr Show—an odd performance that some of us remember—it was a conscious, tactical attempt to demonstrate that he was really human; and it was McLuhan's work that had inspired Nixon's people to concoct that moment. In other words, that was their deliberate application of McLuhan's theory. They understood the separation of image from reality and the political necessity of concentrating only on the former. So, even though Nixon was in fact a nasty piece of work, politically and personally, his advisers knew that if they could just get him to do something fun and homely, like to play the piano, people would think, well, he's an OK guy. And when Bill Clinton played the saxophone on TV two decades later, he was working in the same tradition. I think Clinton's probably a nicer guy than Nixon was, but I don't think they're politically all that different. In any case, McLuhan has had an influence.

But not necessarily today so much on Media Studies as on the media as a business, on the people who work in the media rather than on people who study the media?

The people who study the media today are in vastly different camps. This is unfortunate in a sense because there's now a greater need than ever for a well-informed critique of the media than ever before, and it seems to me that there are too many people in today's academy who are still touched by the spirit of McLuhan. Their work isn't really critical. All it does is celebrate the media. The post-modern reading of the electronic media tends too often to extoll what it should be deciphering.

My next question takes us from the "global village" to the "electronic cottage." It's about mediated contact as a substitute for personal contact. Is techno-intimacy—which is obviously very fashionable—a satisfying way to communicate or does it make personal relations distant, virtual and safe?

I think democracy requires actual congregation and face to face communication and conversation, such as the talk we're having now. People have to get together in one or another actual forum, they have to assemble, if they're to reclaim any power. Now this is a fact that certainly has not been lost on various authorities over the last thirty years. Right-wing students of political history will tend to refer back to the nineteenth century and its revolutions in a distinctly patronizing and contemptuous way, noting how this or that movement started in an Opera House. They suggest that such assembly was a sign of primitivism and hysteria. And yet the raging crowd does carry with it the potential of a decisive populace—or it might be a parody of such a populace, or what that populace reverts to when it's long denied. In any case, without some physical assembly and discussion, you don't have much democratic possibility at all. Now, we live in an era, as you suggest, that is marked by an epidemic atomism, with people retiring to their cells to go on line or watch TV, or carrying their cells around with them, each with his Walkman on. Now, I don't mean to sound the Luddite note: I can wear a Walkman myself, and I'm on line too, but my own use of those products doesn't mean that there's no room for some critical discussion of their impact.

This state of high-tech isolation is now glamorized as carefully as it was once satirized. My favorite example of this uncanny shift concerns Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, which I regard as a great movie. In one of the most poignant scenes in that film, Dr. Heywood Floyd calls his daughter on the picture phone. He's going to the moon, and she's back on earth, so he's not there for her birthday. They have this Pinteresque exchange wherein they

basically talk about nothing but the telephone. He asks her what she wants him to bring back for her, and she says a 'bush baby,' which he finds off-putting: a bush baby is a little monkey-like creature, and that's too carnal. So he says: "Well, we'll see about that. Is there anything else you'd like?" And then she says: "A telephone." Then he says: "I want you to tell Mummy something for me, can you do that?" She says "yes." "I want you to tell Mummy I telephoned and I'll telephone again tomorrow." It's completely anticlimactic, and wholly self-referential. It's really sad and funny at the same time—that he can't be there with her, and that they keep on talking, helplessly, about the very medium that both unites and separates them.

Well, that same scenario now recurs throughout advertising. For example, there's a TV ad for MCI, which they've run everywhere. A guy is too busy to see his daughter. I think she's going to be in a ballet or something, and he's going to miss that big event—I don't remember the exact set-up. Anyway, he calls her and they "face" each other: that is, each one faces the image of the other—and this is supposed to be a great thing! MCI now represents its own inhuman mediation as a wondrous boon, whereas the satirist exposed the poignancy in the familial non-encounter. He reminds us, while MCI now wants us to forget, that there's a crucial difference between the mediated and the face-to-face communication. It's the difference between lovemaking and the technological simulacrum enabled by the rising porno-sex industries. These things are *not the same*. But the glamour of the costly substitute is universally acknowledged now, and I consider that a very dangerous development. I mean, I don't deny for a moment the great evasive possibilities of the Internet—by which I mean that, by using it, you can get around certain huge corporate interests. But such evasion is becoming more and more difficult. It's something that only a few intellectuals and academics know about anyway and its something that more and more people have less and less reason even to discover.

Every time a new communications technology has come along, from the invention of the telephone up to the World Wide Web, people have waxed utopian about the putative liberatory impact of that invention. This was true of the telephone, of cinema, of radio, of TV and now of the Internet. Such optimism has an antidemocratic ring to it, because it favors gadgetry over the arduous deliberation, and well-considered action, or real people. It urges us to surrender to this new communication, whereupon everything will be just dandy. But it never works that way. It never has worked that way. The new product is instantly monopolized—and the monopoly itself then uses that mystique of liberation to keep selling sets or systems to all those who can afford them.

We all know that today the Internet represents one human out of five hundred, globally speaking, but it's also the must place to be for certain people, like us academics. But isn't this development and the need to sell hardware, software and services which it implies, likely to reinforce corporate control over communication, including inter-personal communications? There's an IBM ad around on the Internet, IBM showing an African, an Asian, a European and an American on the Net, all using global communications. It's a global village, it's McLuhan revisited. It's sort of like a euphoric world of technology. This ad infers that everybody's equal, that everybody has access. But, as we know, information access, which is crucial, is restricted to a small minority that can afford it. Are we not, in fact, moving into what Vincent Mosco dubbed the "pay-per society"?

Indeed, it's not free at all. And it's only the "haves" who subscribe to this rosy view. You'll notice that in those advertising images none of the people who have access are in fact "have nots." They never really look deprived, they only look "other." They'll be black in Africa, say, and they'll be clearly Eskimo, and maybe they'll be patent Mexicans, but they all have nice straight teeth and they're all happy and they're all well. This is simply a corporate restatement of the politically correct view of the masses, which is to say, varied ethnically and sexually, coming in all hues and shapes and ages, but presented as class-free. There's no *economic* diversity in that big happy picture.

The same observation holds for top-rated programs on American television with, for example, "The Huxtables," a well-off black family, no longer really representative of its ethnic group because surrounded by all the consumer objects of a middle-class family.

That's right. This concerns not just the corporation's imposition of a particular view of humanity. It has just as much to do with the failure of the Left, in the United States, to think in narrow terms of 'difference' that have only helped to balkanize the population. Now, when one talks about "the Left" in the United States, one is now talking about people whose discourse revolves very tightly around race and gender, and rarely deals with class. And indeed, Hollywood and TV, as well as advertising and the news people, are all pretty much unified with "the Left" in demonizing the white working-class male as the real problem in America today. In movie after movie, white men, lower-middle-class, trailer trash, appear as the very spawn of Satan. They are now what the Jew was in Nazi propaganda: absolutely devilish, horrible—they should be exterminated. That's simply an inversion of the most reactionary kind of mythology.

Todd Gitlin announced that the New Left was dead, but I have a feeling that there is a “new” New Left that is emerging in America, a younger generation, beyond Schiller, Chomsky and Gerbner, beyond the radical left of the sixties. How would you characterize this new Left, which can’t borrow from Marx, and whose solutions remain within the capitalistic framework?

What once seemed tame politically has come increasingly to seem like something very wild. What once seemed like common decency comes more and more to seem to me like downright heroism. The most radical position one can hold today, while still remaining within the universe of serious persons, is to call for effective anti-trust constraints on the major corporations. There’s really no way we’re going to effect any kind of socialist revolution.

Throughout the West, what passes now for “Socialism” is mere unfettered capitalism wearing a big user-friendly smile. The bonding of Blair with Clinton is quite telling, because they’re both very telegenic performers whose images are likable to liberals while their policies are virtually indistinguishable from the policies of their Republican or Tory adversaries. This brings us back to our discussion of McLuhan, whose legacy has borne its fruit here too, as it did in the days of Richard Nixon’s campaigns.

At this time, it seems to me that the boldest and most reasonable thing that we can do is to talk about getting great numbers of people to see the necessity of anti-trust as a way to cut back the corporate domination of the media and other major economic sectors. The problem with the Left today—and I’m talking specifically about media activists—is its preference for the marginal position. I’m a great believer in, and contributor to, the alternative media; I’ve been on many of those shows, such as *Radio Nation* and *Paper Tiger Television*, and I often write for magazines that have just a few thousands committed readers. This, after all, is where the activist community works and operates. But this community has tended to be so disdainful of the masses that it has finally made itself quite ineffectual. The fact is that most people—and this includes even people who watch a lot of TV—most people are distrustful of the media. They hate the media’s social and political effects and implications. But only the Right Wing has offered a coherent and unfortunately persuasive critique of the media: a critique that is really little more than anti-Semitism. It comes disguised as various other things, but when somebody like Dan Quayle talks about the “cultural elite,” his followers know what he means. He’ll say, “They’re laughing at me in faculty lounges, in newsrooms all around the country.” Well, people know what he means. He means Jews, “pointy-heads,” you know, intellectuals, the educated. Well, Dan Quayle is himself the scion of a

billion-dollar media empire. His father-in-law, Eugene Pulliam, is a very successful newspaper tycoon, who owns big newspapers in Arizona and Indiana. But Quayle's admirers simply can't perceive him as part of the media elite, because as far as they're concerned, the media elite are dark cosmopolites who get together one night every year in some Czech graveyard and decide what's going to happen to the human race. That sort of myth still has tremendous resonance for far too many Americans—and not only on the right, because the Black community in the United States is also largely smitten by this view of the media as Jewish-dominated.

The Left is therefore obligated, it seems to me, to explain to the general public, first of all, who it is who really does own the media, as a way to demonstrate that it's capital, big capital, all around the world. It's SONY, it's Bertelsmann, it's Rupert Murdoch, it's Berlusconi. Some of them are Jewish, most of them aren't. But that's irrelevant. People have to understand not only who owns the media, moreover, but also that there is a close correlation between this tightening oligopoly and the declining quality of all the stuff that those few corporations now pump out into the culture: the gratuitous violence, the inordinate emphasis on a sort of sexuality, the non-stop profanity. These are things that tend to bother the American masses. Such qualms have tended to meet with nothing but contempt from the Left, because the Left is too hip to credit that kind of puritanical reaction. The fact is, however, that what the Left dislikes about the media—corporate censorship of news, the propagation of certain racial and sexual stereotypes—derives from the same common source that also now offends the general public with dirty talk and graphic violence. That common source is the oligopoly now in control. As long as the media is owned by a very few huge players who are locked in an ever intensifying competition with one another, they will aim ever lower in their quest for ever higher returns. If that relationship could be explained to people, then I think that many people on the right, and many who are apolitical, will come to see, as some I know have come to see, that the solution lies not in demonizing particular groups, nor does it lie in censorship, but in the systematic breakdown of the media monopoly.

Censorship is not an issue of the Left, it's an issue of the Right. The solution that the Right proposes for all this media extravagance, the soft porn, the violence, for instance, is certainly an issue of censorship.

Yes, it's only the Right-wing critics of the media who propose or intimate that there should be censorship mechanisms put in place. No one on the Left would ever suggest anything like that, except some radical feminists who have been working with people like the Rev. Donald Wildmon, and some of whom have actually made common cause with

some fundamentalist critics of obscenity. Except for that group, no one on the Left would ever be caught dead advocating censorship, or even talking to anyone like Ralph Reed, or any of those Christian coalition types.

My view is that we will always have such stuff around. There will always be appalling stuff abounding in a free society. There's no way to get rid of it, and I don't think you'd want to get rid of it, it's just there. The problem now is that the wealthiest and most ruthless powers out there have a direct stake in promoting more and more of that stuff with every passing season, so that what once was just one offering among many tends now to become more and more pervasive and mainstream. As the audience moreover has become more blasé, it has tended to become more and more dependent on an ever more titillating kind of pitch. This is, to some extent, inevitable. We all know the experience of having students, or our children, respond to some film that we remember as extraordinarily horrific by shrugging it off and saying, "What are you talking about? *Psycho*? Are you kidding?" And they'll go yawn through *Psycho II* or *Psycho III*.

Now, they can interact with Psycho...

Interact, or do that *Psycho* "ride" at Universal Studios. Those sequels aren't as frightening as the first *Psycho*, but they're a lot more gruesome. The special effects are a lot more startling, and the violence more explicit. This natural tendency to become hardened to the shocks of the past has helped contribute to this general inurement: the latest thing is always something that most people thirty years ago would have been absolutely horrified to see, and that now is taken for granted; especially if it's tongue-in-cheek, people will say, "Well, this is really rather clever!"

A lot of this stuff is marketed by saying: "We're really just kidding."

Yes, exactly, irony is the prevailing tone.

I wonder whether, in a not too distant future, you won't have, on the one hand, programs which are simply advertising, or in which the advertising is so perfectly integrated into the program that you don't even need to have commercial breaks, and on the other hand, at the other extreme and especially at the local level, all these home shopping channels. So, in other words, I'm wondering, whether it will still be possible to make any kind of distinction between programs and advertising.

Well, you've just described utopia as the corporations and ad-makers envision it. It's a world in which the whole environment is a commercial. I think we're headed in that direction. Probably the most offensive thing

about advertising, after World War II, and even earlier on radio in the thirties, the most offensive thing to most people was its interruptive character. Each ad was patently unrelated to what it interrupted and was therefore irritating—often deliberately so. People like Rosser Reeves, one of the great ad-men of the fifties, understood that commercials *should* irritate you. A lot of people thought, mistakenly, that if an ad was, it couldn't really work. Reeves knew otherwise. He did a TV commercial for Bayer Aspirin, "*Fast, fast, fast* relief!" was the punch line. Very, very annoying. Reeves figured out, or intuited, that the ad's being annoying actually helped it sell Bayer Aspirin, because you could associate the irritation of the experience with the pain that requires the pill. So off you go to your drugstore, and you remember Bayer, because that ad was so powerfully annoying. You'd remember even if you didn't know you were remembering.

Something started changing in the seventies, and that change accelerated in the eighties, with the rise of cable, when most people got their hands on cheap remote-control devices. Now it was possible to flip through those annoying interruptions, and this threw the advertising industry into a panic. They started holding "war councils" on the new problem posed by the remote. And what they discovered was the new necessity of making ads completely mesmerizing, quasi-cinematic tours de force full of dazzling special effects and tasty bursts of rock and roll. Thus, TV commercials ceased to be mere annoyances, and became "the best thing on TV," as one book-title put it.

But as the ads became more visually arresting, they also ceased to have even the faintest relevance to the products being sold. Of course, advertising has, from the start, tended to obscure the nature of the thing being sold, because the smart ad-people, even shortly after World War I, knew that they were not selling a particular product, but an essence or a quality or a vision. But since the eighties this irrelevance has become something astonishing. In the intensifying competition to make the ads more striking visually and aurally irresistible, the ads have turned increasingly psychotic. This is no exaggeration. When you watch TV now, the commercials really seem psychotic. They don't make any sense, they address no human need, they're completely self-referential and, for that matter, psychedelic. I mean, they are what we were told LSD was all about some thirty years ago. Commercials have taken over that function, and indeed the entire experience of mass media has taken over that function.

Now, this all happens just as these corporations tend to dominate the media environment to an unprecedented extent. I'm really just restating your question. But once they can control the space, they will do everything they can to fill in everything outside that space with repetitions of the central pitch, so that you've got a commercial in the middle of a de facto commercial, which is crammed with all sorts of other crypto-commercials,

or I should say crypto-programs, or crypto-details. But all those seemingly separate elements are ads as well, or at least they complement the all-important pitch. Thus every part of the available space or every sector of the frame is filled in with the pitch, and the pitch always has the same tone, always has the same quality. This then makes the audience unresponsive in the long run. It just becomes more hysterical, becomes pushier and wilder... so I can't say what's going to happen by and by. Some within the advertising industry have begun to argue that TV advertising is not worth the money for corporations—for reasons you've suggested in your question—and that the advertisers therefore should just give it up, and concentrate instead on promotions and other sorts of hoopla.

My great fear is that once this whole thing breaks down, assuming that it ever does, where will the renewal come from? It might be impossible to move back, or on, to something else, if people have become habituated to a certain kind of stimulus—if they've become incapable of sustained concentration, or of, say, watching *Psycho* because it seems too slow, and it's in black-and-white.

As critics of the media, we tend to talk primarily about—well, about critique. We endeavor to unmask the process of our seduction by these great powers, but it's surely just as crucial that we go back to aesthetics and philosophy, that is to say, to teaching others what a worthwhile artwork is all about, and thereby helping to restore their capacity for that sort of enjoyment. You know, I could say in passing that my primary concern is probably aesthetic rather than political, coming out of literary study as I do. We're now reaching a real crisis-point in the United States, as the aesthetic experience has become so degraded that it's even failing economically. It's even failing as a business venture. Hollywood is in big trouble. Its movies come out every summer, and every Christmas-time, and they mostly lose tens of millions of dollars. The music industry is in huge trouble. CDs don't sell, nobody's buying them. The publishing industry has been in decline for five years. The rates of book returns sometimes approach 60%, so that the smallest houses just go out of business, and only the giants—those owned by the likes of Rupert Murdoch and S. I. Newhouse—can afford to take the hit because they also own cable systems and newspapers. And the viewership of TV news, according to the Pew Foundation, declined by 10% last year. I don't know what these people are doing instead. In any case, all these purely market-driven ventures in the arts and journalism are so timid, so barren and so backward-looking that they've gotten very, very boring.

Media studies often emphasize the importance of local media in the United States as opposed to other countries. But does local content, which is of course often advertising- and entertainment-based, does it in fact imply local control? Apparently, judging from the charts you recently

published in The Nation, it doesn't seem so. Are there in fact any examples of really independent local media?

There is virtually no local media left in the United States. Let me talk about Baltimore, where I've been living for a long time. There used to be three newspapers in Baltimore, and when I say 'used to,' I mean in the seventies. (Prior to that, there may have been still more.) There was *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Evening Sun*, and *The News America*. Over the course of the last fifteen years, those three newspapers have become one newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun*, which is owned by the Times-Mirror Corporation, whose current CEO is one Mark Willes, who comes to the newspaper business from the top management position of General Foods. He sold breakfast cereal. Now he runs the Times-Mirror Corporation, which is I think the fourth- or fifth-largest newspaper chain in the United States. They're the ones who closed New York *Newsday*, because there was insufficient return.

Makes sense, since you have breakfast while you're reading the newspaper... [laughter]

Exactly. They own *The Baltimore Sun*—whose editors are strikingly uninterested in hiring writers out of Baltimore. They tend, instead, for reasons I don't know, to hire people from Philadelphia. Because of that disdain for local voices, in conjunction with the pure profit orientation of the parent company in LA, there is virtually no local contribution to the paper, except for a few columnists—and, of course, the major advertisers in the area. The paper is ad-heavy. You can go through eight or ten consecutive pages of advertising for the local Macy's or the giant supermarkets. Here and there, on one page or another, there will be a little wire story, and they'll put all their resources into these long series on things like—and I'm not exaggerating—a high school production of *West Side Story*: an eight-part series, which is feel-good news, a long, soft soap-operatic story about teenagers in their moment in the limelight. A lot of comics, sports, and so on. That's the one local newspaper. Now, just last week *The Baltimore Sun* bought up Patuxent Publishing, which is a chain of various local weekly newspapers in the Baltimore area, so where there had been a feeble sort of competition, there is now none whatsoever.

All the local television stations are owned by huge companies from out of town. This has had direct and drastic political and economic consequences, because the competition for ever higher ratings has driven the stations to emphasize nothing but crime and fires—as in every other city in the United States. On Baltimore's nightly newscast, there is no local political news at all. It's unrelievedly violent and trivial, and it projects a

vision of the city, night after night, as a hell-hole crawling with black criminals. It's therefore not surprising that the city continues to hemorrhage its white residents. About six months ago, there was a piece in *The Sun* about how the city's population had reached an all-time low of 600,000; it used to be a million. People are moving to the suburbs. You watch TV night after night and you think you're lucky to be alive if you live inside the city limits. And of course that threatens the city economically. It repels investment as opposed to attracting it—and just as a kind of parenthetical observation, let me add that the recent Telecommunications Bill passed in 1996, has made any public interference with the process less likely than ever, because now hearings to approve or renew FCC licenses are held only every seven years. So, even if you could start up a movement to protest the anti-urban drift of local TV news, you might have to wait till the year 2004 before you could make your case.

For the radio stations, the situation is appalling. Westinghouse Infinity is now the largest radio corporation in the world, another development enabled by the Telecommunications Bill. Where you had a number of interesting radio stations—progressive rock and roll, and so on—you now have stations that play just a few hit songs repeatedly, and that also keep on playing ads for prime-time TV shows. There's no choice anymore, and again, that's because there is virtually no local participation in the ownership.

I want to come back to the issue of violence, which has gotten public attention. There have been political movements and at least some government action taken, but not by the FCC. But how can the government actually put pressure on the media? The Telecommunications Act of 1996 obviously shows that politicians and media producers are the same. In terms of democracy, this is a big issue. How do you counteract trusts, when anti-trust laws are obviously and blatantly thwarted, and nobody's taking action against them?

In our history, the only time that anti-trust was a politically viable movement—that is, about a century ago—was when there was broad public interest in the problem. And it didn't go that far, of course, but the reason why Teddy Roosevelt could do what he did was that there was a tremendous groundswell of resentment toward the big oil companies and the big steel companies. That mass sentiment, incidentally, was inspired primarily by the efforts of muckraking journalists, who published in magazines like *McClure's* which were as yet unowned by any of these malefactors of great wealth. It's not an accident that muckraking stopped in 1912. It stopped then because people like J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller bought controlling interest in those magazines, which

—surprisingly!—ceased to feature articles like those written by Ida Tarbell about Standard Oil, and investigative works by Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair and others. So, this kind of problem that we now see on a global scale really dates back to the beginning of the century.

The point is that there must be a renewal of public pressure on the government in order for anything like this to ever happen again, and as you said a moment ago, the passage of the Telecommunications Bill was clear proof that there is no difference of opinion between our professional politicians and the media corporations—because they wrote that legislation hand in hand. Newt Gingrich sat down in January of 1995 with people like Rupert Murdoch and Gerald Levin of Time-Warner and John Malone of TCI, all these guys, and they said to him, "Newt, what can we do to help?" This was reported in *The Washington Post*. And he said—this sounds like I'm making it up, but I'm not—he said, "teach your children to behave," by which he meant the journalists working on those giants' dailies and newsmagazines. Gingrich was saying that the journalists working for the giants should not write anything that might somehow contradict the parent company's economic interests. So the collusion was explicit. Therefore, unless and until there is considerable grass-roots clamor for a change, it won't happen.

Now, it seems to me that one of the ways in which this might be possible is through the clear and relentless demonstration of the public health hazard posed by the kind of movies and TV shows that people are watching now. The FCC is out of the picture; they will not do anything. The public health community in the United States is just beginning to recognize the relevance of its own enterprise to the problem of the media monopoly. And at the grass roots level in the inner cities, a lot of people are beginning to see that this constant exposure to really grotesque and violent programming has life and death consequences for their own people. I mean, it isn't just the ready availability of handguns and the participation in the drug trade that makes such young children so easily homicidal. It's also the constant exposure to a vivid propaganda on behalf of violence as a solution to all problems.

Let me tell you a little about the FCC. We did our first chart in *The Nation* [in June of 1996], which shows which corporations own the TV news, and what else they own. And this chart got some advance publicity in the *New York Times*; Frank Rich did a column about it. So, I got a call from a man at the FCC in the Policy and Rules Division, and he said to me, "yeah, um, we read about your chart, and I was talking to some of the economists here at the commission, and we realized, you know, we don't really keep track of this stuff, so we'd be kind of interested to see what you've come up with!" I must say it kind of ruined my day. I thought, 'Wait a minute, isn't that *your* function? Aren't *you* supposed to be keeping track

of this stuff?’ No, they had to come to *me* to find out who owns what! When you said a moment ago that the FCC was never very strong to begin with, you were absolutely right, because the FCC came into existence in 1934 as part of the general commercialization of the radio. Its function was, basically, to referee disputes between the biggest players. So even though people in the business love to make the FCC sound like Big Brother, that’s a ludicrous but very useful rhetorical move to make people think that there’s some real danger of gross over-regulation.

What’s happening to public services? Isn’t a renewal of public service interest, in spite of all this monopoly and the financing issue, a possible solution?

When the government and industry won the day in 1934, and managed to establish the commercial paradigm for US broadcasting, they, for all intents and purposes, ended the discussion right there. Through the previous seven years—nobody really knows this, unless they’ve read Robert McChesney—there had been a spirited national debate to decide whether or not American broadcasting should be commercial at all. The debate ended in 1934 and, from that point on, what you’re calling public service was relegated to the margins of the commercial spectacle. The problem now is first of all that what little alternative there is on PBS and public radio is completely dependent on federal disbursements. When you’ve got a Congress dominated by right-wingers and people who are otherwise in the pockets of the big media powers, it becomes increasingly difficult for the public services to get the money they need to operate, so they tend to kow-tow to the Right, and to the corporations, make their stuff as harmless as possible, as apolitical as possible. Therefore, what should be a great venue for independent documentaries is not, except for “Frontline” and a very few others. Otherwise, there’s little on public TV that raises critical questions about the commercial media, or about the government or anything else.

The solution, I believe, has to lie in creating a fund out of taxes on advertising and tolls on usage of the airwaves. This is a notion that strikes some Americans as dangerously radical. As you know, they’re willing to go as far as auctioning off the airwaves, which is ridiculous; it’s public property. Users should pay tolls for using them, and there should be a tax on all commercial advertising. There would then be more than enough to pay for public broadcasting. Until that happens, public broadcasting will become increasingly timid, and ever more reliant on commercial advertising. Right now in the United States there’s a big debate about whether or not they should put outright commercials on public TV. They’ll soon be doing it. As it is, they feature many solemn announcements by

their 'corporate underwriters,' which is just commercial advertising by another name. They really ought to go more in the direction of the BBC, and make themselves politically unassailable by getting their own funding.

But there's another dimension to the problem that I have to mention. I talked before about Baltimore's culture dissolution under the pressure of absentee owners. It isn't only a commercial problem. National Public Radio provides an incentive to local NPR affiliates all over the country, an incentive to do as little public programming as possible. I say this as one who had his own show for eight years on WJHU. I talked about media issues every week, for free. And that was just one of several local shows that WJHU did do, that it no longer will do. Partly because University administrators didn't like the things I was saying, but also because they would prefer to pay nothing to NPR in order to get a number of NPR shows that are national shows that come out of Washington or Boston, so that even there, Baltimore's leading public radio station is in its own way just as homogenized as the TV stations and the radio stations that are commercial. So, what you basically have is a faintly liberal fifth network. It's not adventurous, it does not vary from city to city. And it has to do with the fact that they're all scared of congressmen, and they're increasingly dependent on the very industry to which they should be offering an alternative. So, you can't say that the public service media is thriving. It's not.



