

WHY AMERICANS SHOULD TAKE BACK THE MEDIA

CONGRESSMAN BERNIE SANDERS

For a number of years now, many of us have believed that the problem of corporate control over the media and consolidation of ownership had to be dealt with as a political issue. The recent public response to the Federal Communications Commission's attempts to loosen media ownership regulations—millions of people contacted legislators in Washington during 2003—shows us the very long way we have come in making that happen. It is high time that the American public woke up to the dismal public service our media system provides and started demanding better.

The reality now is that a handful of huge media conglomerates, such as Viacom, Time Warner, News Corporation, General Electric, Clear Channel, and Disney, with enormous conflicts of interest, largely determine the information the average American receives. In my view, this is a very dangerous trend. A vibrant democracy requires a full airing of all points of view. Increasingly, this is not the case. With few exceptions, the mass media now present to the American people the perspective of the wealthy and powerful, while largely ignoring the needs of the middle class, working families, and the poor.

The broad strokes of why media consolidation has occurred, the crisis in journalism it has produced, and the deeply antidemocratic forces at work to maintain monopoly control over public voices have been ably discussed at length by others in this book. What I want to focus on is how the media impacts those of us who are in day-to-day politics and the issues our constituents care about. This is something that I know about as a congressman of thirteen years and a mayor of eight years.

But before I do that, I want to briefly relate an incident that touches on everything this book is about, and that we can still learn from today. About thirty years ago, I had run for office in Vermont as a third-party candidate and received 1 or 2 percent of the vote. And then, having been a little bit involved in media production, I decided to produce a video biography on the life of Eugene V. Debs, one of my heroes—the great labor and socialist leader of the early part of the 20th century.

McDesney et al (eds.), *The Future of the Media*
(Seven Stories Press, 2005)

The video was sold mostly to universities around the country. In the process, however, in order to get additional exposure, I sent the video to Vermont Public Television, which, at that time, had a weekly slot available for independent productions. To make a very long story short, after months of delay, Vermont Public Television wrote me that they couldn't put the show on the air because it didn't present "both sides of the story," or some other such nonsense. In other words, it was kept off the air because of its political content.

How did I respond to that? First, I learned from some other independent filmmakers in the state that they too had not been able to get their work on Vermont Public Television, even when their productions were without political content. In a very significant way, Vermont Public Television was just not open to film producers in its own state. So it wasn't just me. Next, we all got together and began an unofficial media movement that focused on Vermont Public Television, which at that time was owned by the University of Vermont. Simply put, we raised hell.

In the course of our efforts, we broadened our concerns beyond our own narrow interests to the whole question of what public television in a small rural state was supposed to be about. What should its focus be? Who should it serve? How should programming decisions be made? We continued asking questions, organizing interested citizens, and drawing public attention until the broadcasters decided to meet with us. In the end, the university and Vermont Public Television were forced to hold a three-hour prime time Town Meeting on the Air, jointly produced by the university and our committee, to discuss the function of public television in Vermont.

That Town Meeting on the Air was an incredible experience. The antiestablishment group at the studio had about fifteen people, and the establishment side had an equal number. The Town Meeting, of course, welcomed phone calls to the studio—and did they come in. So many phone calls reached the station that the switchboard to the studio actually broke down. This kind of public outcry caused quite a stir. In short order, thanks to our efforts, the management of Vermont Public Television was replaced, our committee was given the right to produce six prime-time shows on issues of our choice, and the station became somewhat more responsive to the needs of Vermonters.

Thirty years ago, at that Town Meeting on the Air, I learned that the issue of the media was one that people felt strongly about. In my view, this is even more true today; at a time when Americans have been taken to war on false information; at a time when Americans have been hoodwinked on public healthcare, energy policy, and tax reform; at a time when fewer and fewer Americans know the first thing about the way the government works, much less where their voice can make a difference. These are crises in the media. We are all awakening to that crisis in dark times, and our hope lies in the speed and passion of people's organizing themselves to make change.

I am proud, looking back, that it was my own state of Vermont that held the first series of congressional town meetings in the country to discuss the problem of corporate control over the media. In my small state, we brought out over 1500 people to debate the issue and imagine a better media system and the paths to achieving it. The energy and emotion in all of those meetings brought me back to the lesson I had learned during the Town Meeting on the Air thirty years ago. Trust me: media is an issue that people are concerned about. That's true in Vermont, and it is true all over America.

In Congress in the last year or two, progressives, liberals, and conservatives have been working hard in a most unlikely coalition to stop the Bush administration from allowing even more media consolidation in our country, the exact opposite of the direction we should be going. Our demand is for more diversity, more competition of ideas, more localism. Not a situation in which an ever-smaller number of multinational corporations control what we see, hear, and read.

In September 2003, the Senate voted overwhelming to reverse the FCC and restore public-interest regulations over media consolidation. When the House Republican leadership refused to take up the issue despite enormous public pressure, we gathered a coalition of members to demand a vote. A total of 205 of us in the House of Representatives sent a letter to the Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, requesting a vote on this issue. The American people have a right to know where their elected representatives stand on an issue of such concern to so many citizens. "Mr. Speaker, respect democracy: Give us a vote!" Sadly, as has so often occurred in recent years, the Speaker refused to allow democracy to prevail in the House. We were forced to pursue a motion to discharge, which would allow the members to overrule the Speaker, force the bill out of committee, and bring it to the floor for a vote. It was a long, hard fight, shaping up to be even longer and harder. But we were quite confident that a large majority of citizens were behind us.

In June 2004, the efforts of the millions of Americans who contacted legislators and regulators and organized a full-scale media reform movement were completely vindicated. A federal appeals court heard arguments from a group of public-interest lawyers, led by the Media Access Project, challenging the FCC's attempts to loosen media ownership rules. The judges ruled decisively in their favor. This small group of attorneys, buoyed by principle, reason, and the overwhelming support of the American people, defeated the legal teams of the Bush administration, the largest broadcasting groups, the major television networks, and the largest newspaper chains. The thin arguments of the Republican majority at the FCC and its allies in the Congress were blown out of the water, and the truth was laid bare. The Commission's antipublic ruling was firmly rejected on the grounds that it was unsupported by reasonable evidence and ungrounded in the core principles of the public interest. The courts have given us an enormous opportunity to get the ball rolling back in the other direction—away from media consolidation and

toward a more democratic system of public communication. The implications of such a movement are hard to overstate.

The main point I want to make is that if you are interested in addressing the major problems facing our country: an economy that works for all Americans rather than just the very rich; a nation in which all Americans are guaranteed health care through a national health care program; the need to break our dependence on fossil fuels and move to sustainable energy and protect our environment; a nation free of discrimination based on race, gender or sexual orientation; a nation in which we have a much fairer distribution of wealth and income; a nation in which all Americans have the opportunity to get the education they need regardless of social standing; and perhaps most importantly, a nation in which we have a vibrant democracy with a voter turnout not of 40 or 50 percent, but of 80 or 90 percent—if you are interested in these concerns, or a dozen others, you *must* be interested in the issue of corporate control over the media.

In my view, we will not be successful in creating social justice in this country, environmental sanity, and foreign policies that lead us to peace and not war, unless we make fundamental changes in the media. The media are intricately related to all these issues. One would be very naïve, indeed, to believe that we can have a substantial impact on any of those issues without changing how the American people receive information or, in fact, the very kind of culture that our media system helps to create.

Clearly, it is not difficult to understand that the large, multinational corporations that own much of our media are not “fair” in terms of their political or economic coverage. Why should that be otherwise? As large multinational conglomerates, owned by some of the wealthiest people in the country, they are sympathetic to tax breaks for the rich and corporate welfare from taxpayers. They are antunion and support trade policies that allow them to throw American workers out on the street so that they can move their operations to China and other low-wage countries. They are prowar because in wartime viewing audiences substantially increase. Large media corporations help to create the “consumer culture” because, in fact, their main function is not to inform or entertain, but to sell the products their advertisers produce.

From a broad perspective, we can divide our major media outlets into at least two general areas. First, we have media outlets like Rupert Murdoch’s Fox TV and *The New York Post*, the Reverend Moon’s *Washington Times*, the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*, and the radical voices of talk radio like Rush Limbaugh. These right-wing outlets should simply be seen as an extension of the Republican National Committee. They are, pure and simple, the propaganda arm for right-wing Republicans and, as often as not, work closely with them.

On the question of the second category of mainstream media, I believe that an examination of their record on the question of “fairness” would show that, while

clearly not as extreme as the right-wing media, they also lean to the right. Let me cite a few examples. Contrast the mainstream media coverage of President Bill Clinton, a moderate Democrat, with that of George Bush, a right-wing Republican. One was attacked mercilessly from before he took office until after he left. The other has, for the most part, been given a rather free ride even as he hacks away at our civil liberties, undermines our economy, and goes to war on flimsy pretenses. Another example is the presidential campaign of Gore versus Bush, where one candidate was berated constantly for items as small as the color of his shirts, while the other was never challenged about his corrupt business dealings, his dubious military record, and his oxymoronic policies of “compassionate conservatism.” Further, and very importantly, there was the coverage of the mainstream media that took place leading up to and including the war in Iraq. The situation became so bad, so completely dominated by whatever point of view and spin the Bush administration wanted to push on the American people, that large numbers of Americans literally abandoned the national media’s coverage of the war and turned to the BBC, the CBC, and the international media—now accessible over the Internet—for objective coverage.

While the issue of “fairness” of the corporate media on this or that political or economic issue is extremely interesting, that is not really what I want to focus on. The main point I want to make is that far more important than how the media cover a particular issue is the question of how the media determine what issues are important, or unimportant. In other words, what are the criteria that determine that some issues should appear on the front pages and receive widespread coverage, or as lead items on the television news, while other issues are ignored or deemphasized?

As a United States congressman, my major concern is the lack of emphasis, the lack of coverage, that is given to some of the most important issues facing the middle class and working families of our country, and the huge impact that media refusal to deal with these issues has on political participation in the United States and on the quality of American democracy.

Let me give some concrete examples.

Over the last thirty years, there has been an explosion of technology. Worker productivity has substantially increased, and corporate revenues have soared. Yet, the average American worker is now working longer hours for lower wages. From an economic point of view, reflecting the interests and the needs of tens of millions of American workers, *this is the major story of the last thirty years*. The middle class is shrinking. Two breadwinners in a family need to work in order to support a household, where thirty years ago one worker could do that. Americans now work, by far, the longest hours of any people in the industrialized world, and millions of them are exhausted and stressed out. We have just witnessed the greatest loss of jobs since the Great Depression. Our manufacturing sector—long

a source of high wages and job security—has been decimated. The impact on working families has been extremely severe, unprecedented in the postwar era. And yet this story rates well below the latest celebrity trial in the list of the media's top items of attention.

Yes, we can read editorial after editorial from the largest newspapers in America giving us the Fortune 500 position on the virtues of the global economy and unfettered "free trade." But how many editorials do we read that tell us what happens to workers when two million decent-paying manufacturing jobs are lost in the last two years, as companies move their production to China, Mexico, and other low-wage countries?

In fact, that enormous story, in the broadest sense, has been virtually ignored by the corporate media. The result is that millions of working people who are hurting economically turn on the television and discover that their reality is not reflected in the media. They learn about crime and disasters, celebrities and sports, human-interest stories, the weather, and political attacks, but they don't learn much about why their standard of living and quality of life is declining. In other words, they learn about almost everything except what is happening in their lives. And they certainly don't get the kind of information they need to determine how they can improve their situation. Nor do they are given any evidence that political involvement in a democratic society is even an option for improving their lives. If people do not see the reality of their lives reflected in the media they see, hear, and read, should we really be surprised that in the last national election only 40 percent of Americans voted, and that voter turnout in this country is going down?

Another issue. We hear from our current political leadership about the importance of religion and morality. Well, the United States now has the greatest gap between rich and poor of any major nation, and that gap is growing. While the richest 1 percent own more wealth than the bottom 95 percent, the CEOs of large corporations earn 500 times the salaries of their employees. In the United States, today, there are children who go hungry, and many of our fellow Americans sleep out on the street. Is it fair, is it just, is it moral that a tiny handful of people enjoy incredible wealth while millions of their fellow citizens struggle to keep their heads above water and many, in fact, are simply not making it economically? Why has the media determined that gross disparity in wealth and income is not a moral or religious issue? What I can tell you is that in my twenty-one years as an elected official not one reporter, not one, has ever asked me, "Bernie, what are you going to do to end the national disgrace of the United States having the most unfair distribution of wealth and income in the industrialized world? Damn it. What are you going to do about that?" That question has never been asked of me or probably any other member of Congress. It's a nonissue.

When you turn on television today, you will see many shows analyzing today's football game and analyzing the last football game and analyzing the next football

game. You will see shows, many shows, that talk about the ups and downs of the stock market and about the latest celebrity divorce or scandal. You will see shows about cooking, about shopping—there are whole networks made only for shopping—and about weather. Meanwhile, at a time when millions of Americans participate in trade unions, and with trade unionists earning 30 percent more than nonunion workers who do the same kind of jobs, how many programs have you ever seen that discuss why it is important for workers to be in a trade union? Or how workers can form a union? Or what positive things happen when a workplace is unionized and workers have a say in their job conditions? Millions of workers are in unions, millions more want to be organized, and the media are completely silent on that issue.

At a time when forty-three million Americans lack health insurance and some seventy-five million have gone without health insurance for some period in the last two years, there is little in-depth coverage from the media. This situation is inexcusable. The United States is the only nation in the industrialized world without a national health-care program that guarantees health care for all. Meanwhile, we spend twice as much per capita as any other country on health care, and we pay, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. How much serious discussion have you seen in the media that compare our health-care (non)system with the health-care programs of other countries? How many Americans even know that there are alternatives to our failing, inefficient market-based system? How many Americans know that, for much of the world, health care is a right of citizenship?

The media report, over and over again, President Bush's views about how America stands for "freedom and democracy." Given that reality, one might expect that the media would pay some serious attention to the fact that the United States has the lowest voter turnout among major countries and that the rate of voter participation is getting worse every election. Why do the overwhelming majority of low-income people and young people not vote? Why is political consciousness so low in our country? What can we do to achieve the same voter turnouts as Western Europe, Canada, or Scandinavia? Seen any good programming on that subject lately? Seen any major efforts on the part of the media to play a constructive role in increasing voter turnout?

In terms of the most important current foreign-policy issue, President Bush announces that he invaded Iraq in order to bring, among other things, democracy and prosperity to that country. Twenty years ago, when Ronald Reagan supported the Contras in Nicaragua, he said much the same thing. In order to get a sense of how effective unilateral American military action has been from a historical context, and whether the stated goals have been accomplished, one might think that there would be widespread and serious media coverage of contemporary Nicaragua. The United States funded a war in Nicaragua, which killed and wounded many thousands of people there and resulted in the removal of the Sandinista government from power. What have been the results, and what might these tell

us about the future of Iraq? With the defeat of the Sandinistas, how is democracy and prosperity doing in that small Central American country? What can we learn about Nicaragua that might be relevant to our current experience in Iraq?

Rather amazingly, there is almost no coverage of Nicaragua today. When the United States was attempting to overthrow the Sandinistas, there was constant and full-blown media attention and every problem in that country received extensive coverage. Today, nothing. Nicaragua no longer exists for the American media. It would take very little work to discover that fourteen years after the victory to bring "democracy and prosperity," Nicaragua's deteriorating economy has made it one of the poorest countries in the world. Unemployment in Nicaragua today is over 50 percent, basic social services are almost nonexistent, and there are reports that some children in that country have died of starvation. In terms of freedom and democracy, the last president of that country is being investigated for allegedly stealing over \$100 million, an incredible sum for a country so small and poor. Could any lessons be learned from today's Nicaragua regarding American foreign policy in Iraq, unilateral intervention, and whether political rhetoric had anything to do with reality? Maybe? Any wisdom to be learned is silenced by the total media blackout that exists today with regard to Nicaragua.

And I could go on and on and on. As a general rule, the more important the issue is to the well-being of the American people and to our understanding of our place in the world, the more likely an honest debate and a general hearing of the facts would provoke sweeping change, the less coverage the issue receives. The situation is shamefully predictable. It is totally unacceptable for a society that aspires to democratic freedom and self-government.

As we fight for media reform, therefore, let us remember that our major concern should be not just fairness and objectivity on the issues that are covered. Those are important, but far more important is the need to end a media system in which a handful of corporations determine for us what, in fact, is covered, what is considered important, and what is considered unworthy of attention. What media reform really means is that the American people, to the greatest degree possible, should be making those determinations. When we accomplish that end, we'll have the kind of vibrant democracy that will make us proud.

LESSONS FOR REALISTIC RADICALS IN THE INFORMATION AGE

MARK LLOYD

For a very brief period of time, roughly the fifteen years between 1969 and 1984, local communities exercised real power over television, and the trends toward diversity in television were headed upward. I benefited directly from the hard work of civil-rights activists focused on media, and I have been working ever since to restore the media justice they fought for.

I took my initial steps into American journalism with a newspaper article for the *Westland Daily Eagle* in 1970, at the age of fifteen. At that time I began to understand the pull of storytelling as a vehicle for advocating social change, and nothing seemed more important to a young black man growing up in a race-torn society. The lesson about the power of journalism was reinforced by the drama of Watergate. The reporting of President Nixon's illegal activities by two relatively young reporters at *The Washington Post* created many young journalists and vindicated a profession then under attack by the soon-to-be convicted felons of the Republican Party. If you wanted to change the world, follow Woodward and Bernstein and write.

But what I had trouble reconciling was the Kerner Commission Report of a few years earlier. That look at the causes of the riots of the mid-1960s, including the riot in Detroit, my birthplace and still the home of many relatives, noted the failure of journalism to convey what it meant to be black in America. What I did not fully appreciate was that there were so few black and brown reporters working at the paper I once delivered, the *Detroit News*, or working alongside the Republican Woodward. While there were regular reports on the "Negro problem," somehow stories about bigotry in the media never made it to the front page or to newscasts.

Receiving little fame or attention, lawyers and activists in the civil-rights movement fought to make space for Americans like me in the all-white newspaper rooms and in radio and television stations. I would still face tremendous barriers and racism to get to that place, but lawyers and activists were changing the face of American journalism, just as journalism was taking credit for changing America.