

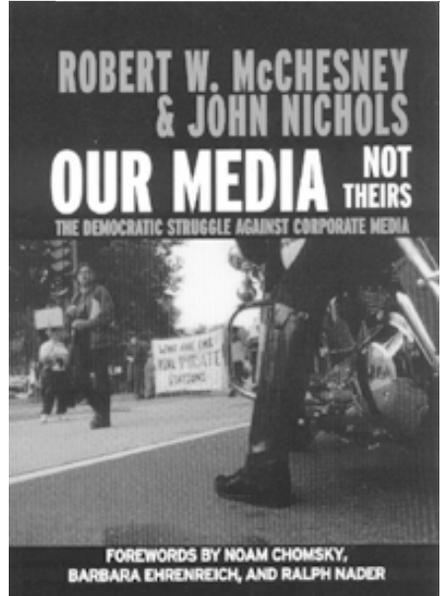
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Powerful case for ending the corporate media stranglehold

Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media, edited by Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols. Forewords by Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich and Ralph Nader. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002. 140 pp. ISBN 1 58322 549 8

THIS BOOK'S message has a salutary lesson for us in Oceania, half a globe away from the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols have argued for an honest debate over a total rethink of policy if the media is to continue to have an effective role in democracy, if it is to remain a genuine Fourth Estate. They present a persuasive case for building a mass movement that seeks to replace *their* [corporate] media with a media that serves ordinary citizens — *our* media. According to McChesney and



Nichols, the constitutional founders in the United States guaranteed freedom of the press because they knew democracy needed 'rich and diverse sources of information and ideas'. Essentially, they argue that the multinational media corporations are too powerful and should not be allowed to dictate to governments the limits placed on competition in the broadcast and print media sectors.

People 'know the media are betraying their public trust' (p 13). Whether it's what's on TV — the exploitation, the commercialism — or the news and public service programming that isn't on the TV, people are acutely aware that what they're getting is not what they want or need.

The argument echoes the authors' earlier joint book, *It's the Media, Stupid*, but this time it is argued far more strongly with suggestions for a community strategy to match. It also parallels one of the themes of McChesney in *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* and in McChesney and John Bellamy Foster's *The Big Picture*. McChesney and Nicholls outline the long tradition of 'media activism' in the US as a significant political force, which enjoyed a period of popular resurgence through much of the 20th century.

This resurgence began with a critique of capitalist journalism in the first two decades of the century. In the 1930s, a movement challenged the establishment of commercial broadcasting, along with a group that set out to 'radically limit' advertising (p 137). Following the second World War, the Congress of Industrial Organisations tried to establish an independent FM radio network, but it was one of the first casualties of the McCarthy era war on the Left.

Elsewhere in the book (p 15), Noam Chomsky reminds us about how Tom Paine two centuries ago issued a call to 'recover rights' that had been lost to 'conquest and tyranny', thereby opening 'a new era to the human race'. Chomsky renews the challenge to carry forward the endless struggle for freedom and justice. Unfortunately, few seem to have heeded that challenge,

least of all some 500 journalists who chose to be 'embedded', or as most cynics preferred to describe it, bedded with the military during the invasion of Iraq.

Some 2000 journalists covered the war in an unprecedented voyeuristic view of a one-sided destruction of a nation in what was an 'illegal' war. Some estimates put the number of Australian journalists on the ground covering the war as high as 100, but certainly they were there in 'larger numbers than in Korea, Vietnam, the Indonesian confrontation and the First Gulf War', all of which had significant Australian military involvement (Tidey, 2003: 5). (If you think this is a high number, *The New York Times* alone had 30 journalists in the field.) (*ibid*).

In contrast, merely three journalists from New Zealand were covering the war for mainstream media, all television reporters and all on the periphery, both geographically (well clear of the battle zones) and in terms of coverage insights.

However, one NZ freelancer, Jon Stephenson, was in Baghdad to report the invasion and he has reported for a string of media since then.

The target for this war was a Third World nation that had been inhumanely impoverished and effectively 'neutralised' as a military force by 12 years of sanctions on top of the defeat in the

1991 Gulf War. Under a tyrant, yes, but Iraq had no chance against the might of the Anglo-American forces. The propaganda myth of the 'elite' Republican Guard forces evaporated soon enough. This was a country with 1980s Soviet-era vintage military equipment and virtually defenceless against modern digital era precision armaments.

McChesney and Nichols focus on the perceived faults of the US corporate media system, but much of their argument equally translates to many other countries, notably Australia (dominated by three media conglomerates), New Zealand (two) and Pacific countries (particularly Fiji and Papua New Guinea, which are dominated by Murdoch's two daily newspapers, and French Polynesia and New Caledonia where Robert Hersant owns all three dailies). To be fair and accurate, the authors admit that journalism is

flawed not merely due to corporate pressures to generate profits or to satisfy the political desires of the owners, the problem goes deeper than that. Much of the problem of contemporary journalism is due to the codes of professional journalism that emerged a century ago, and that remain of paramount importance in understanding journalism today. Professional journalism was a revolutionary break with the idea that the

journalism of the medium - usually a newspaper at the time — would and should invariably reflect the political viewpoints of the owner (p 63).

Partisan journalism — 'the bread and butter of Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln' — could only be defended in an environment where there were competitive markets, and a wide range of opinion. The idea of professionalism was to wean journalists of the propaganda of their owners of the period. However, as the authors argue, based on a range of research, the professional code 'smuggled in' the political biases of the owners while giving the media a veneer of being nonpartisan, even objective (p 64).

In his foreword, Ralph Nader argues that the public needs to demand more from the broadcast systems. Radio and television stations are the tenants while the public of the United States own the broadcast airwaves. Higher rent money should be paid to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) as landlords on behalf of the public. In turn, this rental should be paying for audience-run networks that serve democracy. Some would argue that in the New Zealand context that NZ on Air performs much of that role. However, Nader would argue that is not enough.

Nader says the public should be strongly supporting the notion that

multinational corporations should not be allowed to dictate to governments the limits placed on competition in the broadcast and print media sectors. Every means should be used to 'break up monopolies and open up a true, wide-ranging democratic dialogue'.

The recent narrow range of debate in the US about Iraq has demonstrated how far removed from democracy much of the US media has become. But this also applies to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. There is more hope in Britain because of the wide diversity and honest and unashamed political leanings of various print media.

For McChesney and Nichols, their strategy for mobilising a media-reform agenda in the US includes: Establish a full tier of low-power noncommercial radio and television stations across the nation, apply existing antimonopoly laws to the media; establish formal study and hearings to determine fair media ownership regulations; revamp and supercharge public broadcasting to eliminate commercial pressures; provide for a US\$200 individual tax credit for grants to any nonprofit medium; lower mailing costs for nonprofit print media; and revamp copyright laws to protect the ability of creative producers to earn a living. With the curbing of corporate dominance, an 'amazing variety of well-funded alternative media would

emerge ... many noncommercial and nonprofit' (p 138).

A utopian vision? No, the whole point is for the public to understand that it actually has the power as citizens to take on the media establishment and to change how things are done.

References

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