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Beyond mass media

Mass media are inherently corrupting. A small number of owners and editors exercise great power over what is communicated to large numbers of people. Mass media should be replaced by participatory media organised as networks, such as telephone and computer networks. Strategies to supersede mass media include changing one's own media consumption patterns, participating in alternative media and using nonviolent action against the mass media.

Complaints about the mass media are commonplace. To begin, there is the low quality of many of the programmes and articles. There is the regular portrayal of violence, given an attention out of proportion with its frequency in everyday life. More generally, most of the mass media give much more attention to crime, deaths, disasters, wars and strife than to harmonious communities, acts of kindness and win-win conflict resolution. The mass media frequently create unrealistic fears about criminals, foreign peoples and mass protest.

“News” often is more like entertainment than information or education. News reports, especially on television, are typically given without much overt context. The latest events are described, but there is no explanation of what led up to them or caused them. Consumers of the media consequently hear a lot of facts but frequently don't understand how they fit together. “Context” is the result of the assumptions behind the facts, and

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this context is all the more powerful because it is neither stated nor discussed.

Even the “facts” that are presented are often wrong or misleading. Powerful groups, especially governments and large corporations, shape the news in a range of ways, such as by providing selected information, offering access to stories in exchange for favourable coverage, spreading disinformation, and threatening reprisals.

Advertising is another powerful influence on commercial media. Advertisers influence what types of stories are presented. But more deeply, advertisements themselves shape people’s views of the world. They are a pervasive source of unreality, fostering insecurity and consumerism.

There are indeed many problems with the mass media. But some media are much better than others, judged by the criteria of accuracy, quality and independence of special interests. Most media critics seem to believe that it is possible to promote and develop enlightened, responsive, truly educative mass media. Efforts at reform can be worthwhile, but have intrinsic limits.

The problem is not with media in general, but with *mass* media, namely those media that are produced by relatively few people compared to the number who receive them. Most large newspapers, television and radio stations fit this description. Mass media by their nature give power to a few and offer little scope for participation by the vast majority. The power of the mass media is corrupting. The only surprise is how responsible some mass media are. Given the corruptions of power, reform of the mass media, although useful, should not be the goal. Instead, the aim should be to replace mass media by communication systems that are more participatory.

The usual approaches

Most analyses of the media assume that there are just two choices, either state control or a free market. The problem with control by the state is that control is centralised. The media of military regimes and bureaucratic socialist states are notorious

for their censorship. The defenders of the “free market” argue that government-owned media, or tight regulations, are similarly noxious even in liberal democracies.

The problem with “free market” media is that they give only a very limited freedom, namely freedom for large media companies and other powerful corporate interests.¹ Everyone is “free” to own a publishing company or television station.

The limitations of the mass media in liberal democracies are not always easy to perceive unless one has access to alternative sources of information. Fortunately, there are some excellent books and magazines that expose the incredible biases, cover-ups and misleading perspectives in the mass media. The magazines *Extra!*, *Free Press*, *Lies of our Times* and *Reportage* give eye-opening accounts of the ways in which the English-language mass media give flattering perspectives of business and government, limit coverage of issues affecting women and minorities, cover up elite corruption, promote government policy agendas, and so forth. The book *Unreliable Sources* gives examples of the conservative, establishment and corporate bias of US mass media on issues such as politicians, foreign affairs, environment, racism, terrorism and human rights.² Intriguingly, conservatives also believe that the media are biased, but against *them*.³

The analysis that underlies these exposés is simple and effective: corporations and governments have a large influence on the mass media, and the mass media *are* big businesses themselves. These factors appear to explain most of the problems. The power of the western mass media is especially

1. Lichtenberg, Judith. 1987. “Foundations and limits of freedom of the press,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Fall, pp. 329-355.

2. Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (New York: Carol, 1990).

3. George Comstock, *Television in America* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), pp. 50-56, reports that about equal numbers of viewers believe that US television is biased towards either liberal or conservative viewpoints.

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damaging to the interests of Third World peoples, being an integral part of contemporary cultural imperialism.⁴

Yes, the media are biased. What can be done about it? Jeff Cohen, of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), has a strategy. He says

- be sceptical of media stories;
- write letters to media companies, make complaints, join talk-back radio;
- don't advocate censorship, but instead advocate presentation of both sides on any issue;
- use public access TV;
- hold meetings and pickets;
- use alternative media.⁵

This is a good grassroots approach. But the goal is “fairness and accuracy,” namely the balancing of news. There seems to be no larger programme to replace undemocratic media structures.

4. See especially the now classic treatment by Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, 4th edition). Two hard-hitting attacks on corporate domination of information and culture, focussing on the US, are Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Gerald Sussman, *Communication, Technology, and Politics in the Information Age* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997). In terms of how the dominant influences on the media operate, one can choose between a propaganda model as given by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988)—based on the five filters of ownership, advertising, sourcing from powerful organisations, attacks on unwelcome programmes, and anticommunism—or a model involving organisational imperatives and journalistic practices as given by W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (New York: Longman, 1988, 2nd edition) and Rodney Tiffen, *News and Power* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), among others. For the purposes here, the differences between these analyses are not important. For many other sources, see James R. Bennett, *Control of the Media in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography* (Hamden, CT: Garland, 1992).

5. Lee and Solomon (see note 2), pp. 340-358.

A sophisticated treatment of these issues is given by John Keane in his book *The Media and Democracy*.⁶ He provides an elegant critique of “market liberalism,” the approach by which governments reduce their intervention in communication markets. He notes that unregulated communication markets actually restrict communication freedom by creating monopolies, setting up barriers to entry and turning knowledge into a commodity. He also points out several trends in liberal democracies that seem to be of no concern to supporters of a free market in communication: the use of government emergency powers, secret operations by the military and police, lying by politicians, advertising by governments, and increasing collaboration between elites in government, business and trade unions. The increasingly global reach of communication corporations is also a significant problem.

The traditional alternative to commercial media is “public service media,” namely government-financed media (such as the ABC in Australia, BBC in Britain and CBC in Canada) combined with government regulation of commercial media. Keane favours revived public service media, with guaranteed autonomy of government-funded media, government regulation of commercial media, and support for non-state, non-market media, a category that includes small presses and magazines, community radio stations and open-access television stations.

Keane’s model sounds very good in theory. He gives an imposing list of things that *should* be done, but he doesn’t say *who* is going to make it happen—the government, presumably. More deeply, Keane doesn’t say how the state itself will be controlled. He wants a new constitutional settlement with enlightened and progressive government media, suitable government controls on commercial media, and promotion of the “non-state, non-market media.” But why should “the state” do

6. John Keane, *The Media and Democracy* (London: Polity Press, 1991).

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all this? Why won't it keep doing what it is already doing, as he describes so well?

Limits to participation

In principle, the mass media could be quite democratic, if only they were run differently. Editorial independence could be guaranteed, minimising the influence of government, owners or other special interest groups. A range of viewpoints could be presented. The power of advertisers could be reduced or eliminated. Opportunities for citizen input into content could be opened up. These are worthy goals. But there are inherent limits to making mass media truly democratic.

Consider, for example, an alternative newspaper with a substantial circulation and reputation. The editors may be highly responsive to readers, but even so some editorial decisions must be made. Choices must be made about what stories to run, which advertisements to accept (if any), which events to publicise, which submissions to accept, what policies to make about language, and so forth. There are innumerable "policy" decisions to be made. Even spelling can be controversial. Should the paper be open to the debate about spelling reform? What about letters to the editor? Should everything be published, or should some selection be made on the basis of topic or quality?

If there are only a few active contributors, then everyone can be involved who wants to be, and all submissions published. But this is extremely unlikely when the circulation becomes large and the publication is seen to be important. Then lots of people see an opportunity to raise their own favourite issues.

These problems are far from hypothetical. They are quite apparent to anyone dealing with alternative magazines with circulations in the tens of thousands, or even just thousands. Not everyone who wants to can have an article published in *Mother Jones*, *New Statesman and Society* or *The Progressive*. Such magazines are "high quality" because they are able to select from many potential offerings. But being able to select also means that the editors have a great deal of power. Being able to

define and select “quality” also means being able to make decisions about content.

Of course, from the point of view of the owners and editors of such magazines, they are hard pressed just to survive. Make some wrong decisions and readership may drop off or financial benefactors may be less generous. (Most “alternative” magazines depend heavily on contributions to supplement subscription fees.) Practising “democracy” within such a magazine, if this means publishing letters from all and sundry or letting readers vote on policy matters, would be a prescription for financial disaster.

These comments are a bit unfair to the alternative media. By definition, even the largest of them is still a small player in the media game. Furthermore, a diversity of perspectives is available through the different alternative media. There are more small magazines available than anyone can read. My point is not to criticise the alternative media, but to point out that participatory democracy is virtually impossible in a medium where a small number of owners and editors produce a product for a much larger audience.

The futility of seeking media democracy becomes even more apparent when the scale is increased: audiences of hundreds of thousands or millions. This is the domain of major newspapers, television stations and wire services. It requires only a little analysis to find that the larger the audience, the more powerful are the key decision-makers in the media organisations and the less effective are any mechanisms for participation. The very scale of the media limits opportunities for participation and increases the power of key figures. The way in which this power is used depends on the relation of the media to the most powerful groups in society. In liberal democracies, governments and corporations, and media corporations in particular, exercise the greatest power over the media. The large scale of the mass media is what makes it possible for this power to be exercised so effectively.

Other arguments for mass media?

Before dismissing mass media, it is worth seeing whether there are other justifications for them. Perhaps there are some overlooked arguments for maintaining mass media even in a fully participatory society. It is worth canvassing a few of them.

Emergencies

The mass media, especially radio and television, can come in handy in emergencies: messages can be broadcast, reaching a large fraction of the population.

But the mass media are not really necessary for emergency purposes. Fire alarms, for example, do not rely on conventional media. Furthermore, network media, including telephone and computer networks, can be set up to allow emergency communications.

Actually, the mass media are a great vulnerability in certain emergencies: military coups. Because they allow a few people to communicate to a large population with little possibility of dialogue, television and radio stations are commonly the first targets in military takeovers. Censorship of newspapers is a next step. This connection between coups and mass media also highlights the role of mass media in authoritarian regimes.

Military strength is no defence against a military coup, and indeed may be the cause of one. To resist a coup, network communications are far superior to mass media.⁷ So, from the point of view of preparing for emergencies, mass media are bad investments.

Media talent

The mass media allow many people to enjoy and learn from the efforts of some highly talented performers and personalities, including actors, musicians, athletes, journalists and commentators. True. But even without mass media, it is possible for people

7. Brian Martin, "Communication technology and nonviolent action," *Media Development*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1996, pp. 3-9.

to enjoy and learn from these talented individuals, for example through audio and video recordings.

Furthermore, the mass media limit access to all but a few performers and contributors. Those who are left out have a much better chance of reaching a sympathetic audience via network media.

A force for good

The mass media are undoubtedly powerful. In the right hands, they can be a powerful force for good purposes. Therefore, it might be argued, the aim should be to promote a mass media that is overseen by responsible, accountable people.

This sounds like a good argument. What it overlooks is how easily power corrupts. Whoever has power in the mass media is susceptible to the corruptions of power, including power sought for its own sake and for self-enrichment.

Large resources

The mass media command enormous resources, both financial and symbolic. This makes it possible for them to pursue large or expensive projects such as large-budget films, special investigative teams and in-depth coverage of key events.

Actually, large-scale projects are also possible with network systems. They simply require cooperation and collaboration. For example, some public domain software (free computer programs) is quite sophisticated and has been produced with the help of many people. In centralised systems, far-reaching decisions can be made by just a few people. In decentralised systems, greater participation is required.

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These four possible arguments for retaining mass media, in some reformed and improved form, actually turn out to be arguments against mass media. The mass media are not necessary for emergencies and are actually a key vulnerability to those who would take over a society. The mass media are not necessary to enjoy and benefit from the talent of others. Power

exercised through the mass media is unlikely to be a force for good since it tends to corrupt those who exercise it. Finally, although the mass media can undertake large projects, such projects can also develop through network media, but in a way involving participation rather than central direction.

Participatory media

In order to better understand the mass media's inherent lack of democracy, it is useful to imagine a communication system that allows and fosters participation by everyone. David Andrews did this with his concept of "information routeing groups" or IRGs.⁸ His discussion predated the vast expansion of computer networks and is worth outlining in its original form. He imagined a computer network in which everyone is linked to several interest groups, with each group having anywhere from perhaps half a dozen up to several hundred people. An interest group might deal with anything from growing apples to racism. Each time a person makes a contribution on a topic, whether a short comment, a picture or a substantial piece of writing, they send it to everyone in the group. A person receiving a message could, if they wished, post it to other groups to which they belonged. Andrews called each of the groups an IRG.

In a network of IRGs, everyone can be a writer and publisher at the same time. But there are no guaranteed mass audiences. If a contribution is really important or exciting to those who receive it, they are more likely to post it to other groups. In this way, a piece of writing could end up being read by thousands or even millions of people. But note that this requires numerous individual decisions about circulating it to further groups. In the case of the mass media, a single editor can make the decision to run or stop an item. In the case of IRGs, lots of people are involved. By deciding whether or not to forward an item to another group, each person acts somewhat like an editor.

8. David Andrews, *The IRG Solution: Hierarchical Incompetence and How to Overcome It* (London: Souvenir Press, 1984).

A system of IRGs can be self-limiting. If a group has too many active members, then each one might be bombarded with hundreds of messages every day. Some might opt out, as long as there was someone who would select pertinent messages for them. This person then acts as a type of editor. But note that this “editor” has little of the formal power of editors in the mass media. In an IRG system, anyone can set themselves up as an editor of this sort. Members of this editor’s IRG can easily look at the larger body of contributions, should they so wish. One of the main reasons why the IRG editor has relatively little formal power is that there is no substantial investment in terms of subscriptions, advertisers, printing equipment or salaries. Participating in an IRG is something that can easily be done in a few hours per week. Investments are lower and positions are less entrenched. An IRG editor will maintain an audience only as long as the editing is perceived to be effective. Similarly, quitting is relatively painless.

To anyone familiar with computer networks, especially the Internet, it may seem that to talk about IRGs is simply an awkward way of describing what is actually taking place on existing networks. Indeed, Andrews’ account of IRGs can be interpreted as a description of what later took place on the Internet. While parts of the Internet operate like IRGs, it is unwise to assume that cyberspace is or will remain a model participatory medium. There are ongoing pressures, inequalities and struggles involving access, cost, commercial uses, censorship and surveillance.

IRGs do not have to be based on computers. They can operate—though more slowly—using the postal system. Again, this already happens with a number of discussions that operate by post, where each member adds a page or so of comment on the current topic and sends it to the group coordinator, who then makes copies of all contributions for all members. For those who have the technology and know how to use it, computer networks make this process far easier and faster.

Another medium that is inherently participatory is the telephone. Phones are very easy to use—only speaking, not writing, is required—and are widely available. Certainly it is possible for a person to dominate a telephone conversation, but only one person is at the other end of the line, or occasionally more in the case of a conference call. In the mass media, one person speaks and thousands or millions hear.

Ivan Illich proposed the concept of “convivial tools.”⁹ This includes technologies that foster creative and autonomous interactions between people. Convivial technologies in the case of the media are the ones that foster participation. The postal system, the telephone system, computer networks and short-wave radio are examples of convivial media.

The implication of this analysis is straightforward. To promote a more participatory society, it is important to promote participatory media and to challenge, replace and eventually abandon mass media. Jerry Mander, in his case against television, gave as one of his four main arguments corporate domination of television used to mould humans for a commercial environment.¹⁰ But all mass media involve centralised power. Mander’s argument should be extended: all mass media should be abandoned.

Saying “mass media should be superseded” is easy. Working out practical implications is the hard part. In my view, although a world without mass media may be a long-term goal, the mass media will be around for quite some time. Therefore, it is necessary to have a strategy to challenge them, from inside and outside, as well as to promote alternatives.

There are already plenty of challenges to the mass media, of course. But these challenges are not to the existence of the mass

9. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973).

10. Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: William Morrow, 1978).

media, but only to the way they are run. In a way, media criticism is a form of loyal opposition.

Wait—before looking at strategies, what if the mass media are being whittled away anyway? Are cable television and the Internet making mass media obsolete by providing more communication channels and creating niche markets? Will newspapers be replaced by net-based news services that can be individually tailored? Is the mass audience a relic of the modernist age, while fragmentation of audiences and perspectives is characteristic of the new postmodern era?

It would be unwise to trust in “natural” processes to cause the demise of mass media. There is nothing automatic about technological and social change. Powerful groups are doing everything they can to control markets and opinions in the changing information order. Another scenario is that mass media will continue to have a major influence and that governments and corporations will extend their influence into the more fragmented channels. After all, television, video cameras and cassettes did not lead to the collapse of Hollywood and large-scale movie-making. If the mass media are ever replaced, it will be due to lots of people taking action to help it happen. Hence the need for strategies, both individual and collective.

Strategies

Here I outline a number of possible strategies, focussing on what can be done by individuals and small groups to challenge mass media and replace them by participatory network media. It would be easy to make some sweeping recommendations about what *should* be done, especially by governments. But to be compatible with the goal of a participatory communication system, the methods should be participatory too. The following ideas are meant to encourage discussion.

Change one's own media consumption patterns

Many people are such regular and insistent consumers of the mass media—television, radio and newspapers—that it's

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possible to speak of an addiction. This also includes many of those who are strongly critical of the mass media. Cutting down on consumption can be part of a process of imagining and fostering a participatory communications system.

Some people may object to this recommendation. Surely, they will say, it's quite possible to be an avid mass media consumer—or to work for the media—while still maintaining a critical perspective and also using and promoting alternative media. True enough. Analogously, a factory worker can certainly remain critical of capitalism and promote alternatives.

My view is not that cutting back mass media consumption is necessary, but that it can be a useful way to change people's consciousness. It is similar to animal liberationists reducing their consumption of animal products and environmentalists riding bicycles and composting their organic wastes. Such individual acts cannot by themselves transform the underlying structures of factory farming, industrial society or centralised media: collective action for structural change is needed. Nevertheless, changes in individual behaviour serve several important purposes: they change the perspectives of individuals, they reinforce concern about the issue and they provide an example (of consistency) for others.

Changing media habits can be incredibly difficult. Watching the news on television is, for many people, a ritual. For others, reading the daily paper is an essential part of each day. Although Jerry Mander's book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* has become a classic in alternative circles, no social movement has developed to abolish TV. There are only some small groups, such as the Society for the Elimination of Television, producing a few newsletters.

One reason may be that—according to one argument—watching television changes one's brain waves, reducing the number of fast waves characteristic of thinking and increasing the number of slow waves characteristic of relaxed states. This explains why watching television seems so relaxing: it allows the brain to switch off. It also explains why television is

so effective at communicating commercial messages. Images go into the brain without processing; the images cannot be recalled, but they can be recognised, for example in a supermarket.¹¹

Another reason why switching off the television is so difficult is that it becomes part of the household. It *seems* voluntary, and it is to some extent. Action must begin at home.¹² It is easier to oppose “alien” technologies such as nuclear power, which are not part of people’s everyday lives. Challenging technologies that are personal possessions, used routinely—such as television and cars—is far more difficult.

Except for some people who must monitor the media as part of their work, mass media consumption is, from a time management view, quite inefficient. Think back on all the television you watched during the past ten years. How much of it was genuinely necessary to be fully informed, or was even genuinely informative? A similar calculation can be made for reading newspapers.

But what if the aim is not efficiency but simply enjoying life and occasionally learning something along the way? This brings the discussion back to lack of participation. Most people have been turned into passive consumers of the media. This will not change until some people take the initiative to break the pattern.

Learn how the media construct reality

If it is essential to consume products of the mass media, a useful antidote is to learn how these media products are created. It is illuminating to spend time with a television film crew or in a newspaper office. It quickly becomes apparent that of the many possible things that could be treated by the media, and of the many possible ways that this could be done, only certain ones

11. Fred Emery and Merrelyn Emery, *A Choice of Futures: To Enlighten or Inform* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976).

12. Frances Moore Lappé and Family, *What to Do After You Turn Off the TV: Fresh Ideas for Enjoying Family Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985); Martin Large, *Who’s Bringing Them Up? Television and Child Development* (Gloucester: Martin Large, 1980).

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actually are chosen. It is also useful to gain some experience on the receiving end of media construction of reality, by joining a rally or media conference and seeing how it is reported, or by being interviewed oneself.

Another way to gain insight into media construction of reality is to undertake a detailed study of some topic, whether it is child rearing, banking, crime or East African politics. This could involve reading books and in-depth articles, investigating alternative viewpoints and consulting with experts and concerned groups. With a good grounding in a range of perspectives and an ability to think confidently about the topic, it is then possible to make an informed assessment of mass media treatments, including biases and omissions.

It is important to be aware of how the media constructs reality, but that alone does not change the dynamics of the media. Therefore it is valuable to communicate what one learns about media constructions to others.

Participate in a group to change media consumption patterns

In a group of two or more people, it can be easier to make some of the individual changes. Individuals can be assigned the task of monitoring particular media and reporting on issues that are important to the group. Others can do the same with alternative media. In this way, individuals don't need to worry so much that they have missed some important item. More important, though, is the process of interaction in the group: discussing the issues. This is what is missing in the individual consumption of the mass media.

Of course, quite a bit of discussion occurs already among friends and colleagues. By working in a more directed fashion in a group, a greater commitment to participation and participatory media can be fostered. Teachers can contribute to this process by giving guidance on how to analyse the mass media and how to use and develop alternatives.

Use the mass media for one's own purposes

This is the usual approach: writing letters to the editor, putting out press releases, being interviewed, inviting media to meetings, holding rallies to attract media coverage, etc. Numerous action groups, from feminists to farmers, promote their cause this way.

Such efforts can shift the emphasis in media coverage, for example from coverage of politicians and business to some attention to social issues and movements. But this does little or nothing to challenge the fundamental lack of participation in the mass media. Furthermore, it can distort social movement agendas. Seeking media attention can be a way of building grassroots support but it can also take priority over building support. Some movement leaders are turned into stars by the media, causing internal stresses and resentments.¹³ All in all, this approach, as a means of promoting participatory media, has little to recommend it. Social movements need a strategy on communication, including how to deal with both establishment and alternative media.¹⁴

Of course, promoting participatory media is not the only goal of social movements. In a great number of cases, using the existing mass media is a sensible and quite justifiable approach. Furthermore, campaigns such as those by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting to challenge biases in the media are extremely important. But it is important to be aware of the limitations of such campaigns. Even “fair and accurate” mass media are far from participatory.

Participating in the mass media is inevitably limited to only a few people or only to minor contributions. Only a few people have the skills or opportunity to write an article—that will be published—for a large newspaper, or to be interviewed for more

13. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

14. Marc Raboy, *Movements and Messages: Media and Radical Politics in Quebec* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984).

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than a few seconds on television. Even an occasional article or television appearance is trivial compared to the impact of those who host a television programme or write a regular column in a major paper. Furthermore, those who are successful in “breaking in” may actually legitimise the media in which they appear. This is analogous to the way that worker representatives on company boards can legitimise both the decisions made and the hierarchical structure of the company.

Many progressives want to use the media, or go into it as journalists or producers, to help the causes in which they believe. The intention is good, and the work many of them do is superb. But it should be remembered that this approach perpetuates unequal participation. It needs to be asked whether the aim is mainly to promote a favoured viewpoint or to foster a discussion involving ever more people. These two aims are not always compatible.

Participate in alternative media

This is an obvious strategy. Possibilities include:

- subscribing to alternative magazines and supporting small presses;
- writing material for newsletters and small magazines;
- publishing one’s own newsletter, magazine or books;
- organising meetings of friends to discuss issues of significance;
- doing community organising with techniques such as public meetings and door-to-door canvassing;
- listening to and producing programmes for community radio and television;
- participating in computer discussion groups;
- producing, collecting and using micrographics (microfiche, microfilm), especially to distribute and save nonstandard works;
- using short-wave radio;
- running workshops on developing skills for network media;
- developing campaigns that help build skills in using alternative media and don’t rely on mass media;

- participating in self-managing media enterprises.¹⁵

These and other initiatives are going on all the time. They need more support and development. This strategy is fully compatible with the goal of participatory media, so there are fewer internal contradictions and traps.

Use nonviolent action to challenge the mass media

Activists have more often used than challenged the mass media. Yet there are numerous methods of nonviolent action that can be used to confront and change mass media, as well as to promote network media.¹⁶ For example, boycotts can be organised of particularly offensive publications or shows. Small shareholders can use direct action to present their concerns at shareholders' meetings. Activists can occupy media offices. However, it is usually extremely difficult for consumers of the media to organise challenges. The best prospects are for media workers. They can challenge and subvert management by publishing or showing items without permission, allowing humorous mistakes to slip through, resigning as a group, working in against orders, and even taking over media operations and running them participatively. Such initiatives can only succeed if there is considerable support from the users of the media. Hence, links between workers and users are essential, for example between journalists and public interest groups.

15. John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Edward Herman, "Democratic media," *Z Papers*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January-March 1992, pp. 23-30. For further references see James R. Bennett (see note 4).

16. On nonviolent action, see Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1981); Per Hørgren, *Path of Resistance: The Practice of Civil Disobedience* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993); George Lakey, *Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987); Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973).

Undermine institutional supports for mass media

This is a big one. It roughly translates into “undermine monopoly capitalism and the state.”

The mass media would not be able to maintain their dominant position without special protection. Television is the best example. In most countries, governments own and run all channels. In liberal democracies there are some commercial channels, but these must be licensed by the government. Without government regulation, anyone could set up a studio and broadcast at whatever frequency they wanted. For cable systems, government regulations control who gains access.

The power of commercial television comes, of course, from corporate sponsorship, typically via advertisements. Without sponsorship from wealthy corporations, a few channels would be unlikely to be able to maintain their dominant positions. If a society of small enterprises is imagined—whether run by owners or worker collectives—there would be no basis or reason for large-scale sponsorship of mass media.

Corporations and governments also are crucial in maintaining the position of large-circulation newspapers. In many countries the dominant newspapers are government owned and produced. In capitalist societies, advertisements are essential to keep the purchase price down. Without advertisements, the size of the papers would shrink and the price would jump, leading to a decline in circulation. This would make the newspapers more similar to current-day alternative newspapers and magazines, which typically require contributions above and beyond subscription fees in order to stay afloat. Governments also help maintain large-circulation commercial newspapers in various indirect ways, including high postal rates for alternative media, defamation law (which can bankrupt small publishers—see chapter 6), and copyright (which enables monopoly profits—see chapter 3).

Governments and large corporations support the mass media, and vice versa. Of course, there are many conflicts between these powerful groups, such as when the media criticise particular

government decisions or corporate actions, and when government or corporations try to muzzle or manipulate the media. But at a more fundamental level, these institutions reinforce each other. Without government and corporate support, the mass media would disintegrate. With participatory media instead of mass media, governments and corporations would be far less able to control information and maintain their legitimacy.

In terms of strategy, the implication of this analysis is that challenges to the mass media, and the strengthening of network media, should be linked to challenges to monopoly capitalism and the state. To bring about participatory media, it is also necessary to bring about participatory alternatives to present economic and political structures.

Conclusion

In order for any significant shift away from the mass media to occur, there must be a dramatic shift in attitudes and behaviours. People who neither watch television nor read newspapers are now commonly seen as eccentrics. A shift needs to occur so that they are supported, and it is the heavy consumers of the mass media who are given little reinforcement. Such shifts are possible. For example, anti-smoking activism has dramatically changed attitudes and policies in a few countries about smoking in public.

In order for withdrawal from using the mass media to become more popular, participatory media must become more attractive: cheaper, more accessible, more fun, more relevant. In such an atmosphere, nonviolent action campaigns against the mass media and in support of participatory media become more feasible. Such campaigns, especially if supported by social movements, in turn make changes in personal media habits more likely and acceptable.

This, in outline, is one way that the mass media might be undermined. But it will not be an easy or quick operation. In so far as modern society is ever more based on information and knowledge, the mass media are increasingly central to the

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maintenance of unequal power and wealth. This is all the more reason to give special attention to the task of achieving a society without mass media.