

Many of these ideas are already popular with Americans—when they get a chance to hear about them. Moreover, the enthusiasm tends to cross the political spectrum. The corporate media lobbies work to keep their operations in Washington outside of the public view, because they suspect the same thing we do: When people hear about the corruption of communication policy-making, they're appalled.

But the new media reform coalition we envision cannot be simply about building toward a great day of reckoning. It must also have the near-term objective of organizing on the pressing policy matters that are currently in play in Washington. As mentioned above, the FCC is considering the elimination of the remaining rules that prevent media consolidation, including bans on owning TV stations and newspapers in the same community and limits on the number of TV stations and cable TV systems a single corporation may own nationwide.

The corporate media lobbying superstars are putting a full-court press on the FCC. The proposed scrapping of these regulations will increase the shareholder value of these firms dramatically, and will undoubtedly lead to a massive wave of mergers and acquisitions. If the lesson of past ownership deregulation—particularly the 1996 downsizing of radio ownership rules—provide any indication of where this change will take us, we can expect decreased funding for journalism and increased commercialism. All of this is taking place beneath the radar of corporate journalism, unreported and unexamined—as the 1996 Telecommunications Act was—in classically corrupt fashion.

We know a thousand frustrations and disappointments lie ahead. But consider where the journey could take us. Consider what the

U.S. media landscape would look like if all of the reform agenda we propose were enacted. Corporate dominance over the free flow of information would be curbed, and a truly diverse, creative, multi-cultural, public-interest media would thrive. Across the country, an amazing variety of well-funded alternative media would emerge, both local and national, many non-commercial and nonprofit. In this new world, the privatized marketplace of ideas would become more of a public commons—a vibrant flowering garden, not the commercialized strip mall we currently endure.

"We go around with all this frustration over media. But most of us think it's just something that happens to us," explains Patty Allen, a labor activist who worked 23 years on an Oscar Mayer meatpacking line in Wisconsin and got turned on to media issues by Ralph Nader. "When I first heard Nader say that we own the airwaves and that we have a right to demand something better in return, I remember how liberating it felt. I was saying, 'Wow, now that I know this, what do I do? Where do I sign up? How can I demand a change?' I think there's a lot of people like me all over this country who are ready. But we need a sense that we're not just wasting our time."

Such a realization is critical to unleashing the sort of broad grassroots action that will finally make media a genuine and ongoing issue in America. Media need not be the enemy of our desires for democratic renewal in America. Media can be what Jefferson, Madison and especially the most visionary of our founders, Tom Paine, intended: the tool by which citizens ascertain the information they need to be the governors, not the governed. ■

This essay is adapted from Our Media, Not Theirs: The Democratic Struggle Against Corporate Media (Seven Stories Press).

The Holy Grail

The crusade for media reform

BY PAT AUFDERHEIDE

will face serious obstacles

It is wonderfully invigorating to read Bob McChesney and John Nichols' prose, which echoes many efforts I have covered and participated in over decades working with media reform advocates and activists.

McChesney and Nichols raise excellent points. Communications and media systems are the nervous system of our economy and our political systems. Moreover, they give us the background to our lived experience. No wonder media strongholds are well-guarded. Yes, we really need greater public support for communications and media systems that are more diverse and competitive than the ones we have today, as well as for vastly expanded public library systems and for public cyber-parks. And today we do lack our rallying calls for change. So far, so familiar.

McChesney and Nichols have an agenda, every point of which has been the focus of various media reform movements in the past.

It's all good, if backward-looking. Cable, Internet and wireless are transforming what we even mean by "media," so any future agenda would build on those majestic changes wrought by digital developments. But there are plenty of other good ideas out there and being acted on now to update the agenda.

What is unclear to me, although I would love it to be less so, is what swings a mass movement into wanting that agenda or anything like it. The Holy Grail of media reform, at least over the past 40 years, has been mobilizing the general public to want more than they are getting from their media. "More" usually means more of things that are good for them, and maybe even hard for them, not just more lowest-common-denominator junk. One friend of mine calls this the Sunday School approach to media reform—in the sense that it's always something you want other people to do while you're watching *Six Feet Under*.

This is where I think the big challenges are: developing shared visions in our media and our communications systems of what's possible, what we want, what we and our kids deserve. If I had the answer, I'd just tell you. I am pretty sure I haven't yet seen shared visions that mobilize taxpayers across their many political and cultural differences. And I'm not even surprised at that. Consider some of the rough patches where media reform has tripped up in the past:

What's public anyway? It's easy to complain about *The O'Reilly Factor* and Rush Limbaugh. It's hard to develop models for new electronic public spaces—non-commercial spaces where something other than the market (something like ideology) determines the content. Do you want your tax dollars going to fund (fill in the blank for noxious cause here)? Does your brother-in-law? We still need to wrangle that concept of publicness into a form that makes sense for people who really disagree with each other.

Oh great, another cause. In the '80s, we used to say, "Media is everybody's second-favorite issue." All the national constituency groups (and I've been around many, many tables where McChesney and Nichols' list of potential allies were all represented) basically told us, "We're too busy fighting poverty/racism/police brutality/union-busting/disability discrimination; you fight this issue and let us know."

Too much stuff. It's hard to tell people that in a world of 450 digital channels of television, several national elite newspapers, way too many magazines and newsletters, 21-screen cineplexes, on-demand radio, and all of the World Wide Web that they don't have media choices. The "GE to GM" phrase just doesn't jibe with most people's sense of their options. Yes, cable only reaches two-thirds of the population. Yes, people in rural areas have fewer radio stations. Yes, there is a lot of same-old dreck. But the experience of most people is more about David Schenk's great phrase "data smog" than it is about lack and loss.

Who wants it? We have trouble pointing to any public appetite for more disturbing, thoughtful, challenging public affairs, even among communities of shared values. Look at the anemic state of all "alternative" or left publishing. It may be important to have, but is it the stuff of a mass movement?

Where's the harm? We have great difficulty showing, or even knowing, what the consequences of communications and media arrangements are. That's partly because of the limits of social science. There is no way to neatly disentangle media effects from other ones. Look at decades of inconclusive studies on TV violence. It's also because the real action in media policy is on the bleeding edge of technology, where all the consequences are hypothetical. What are the implications of monopoly control of broadband? The official rejection of open broadband—which would have permitted competition—was

made in an environment where perhaps 5 percent of Internet users had it.

Blowback alert. People love to complain about crap on TV. But some of them hate homosexuality in sit-coms, and they're easily mobilized. We want structural change, not content control.

Building an ideological platform takes time, as conservatives learned, and it can't be done just by fulminating and denouncing. There are messy issues when you're dealing with the basic machinery of culture. Taking a page from the conservatives (as well as environmentalists), we could develop think tanks that work through ideological issues and do real research, and that build press relations with key journalists. We could cultivate tomorrow's opinion-makers today, at high schools, colleges and universities. We can learn from a rich history of media reform.

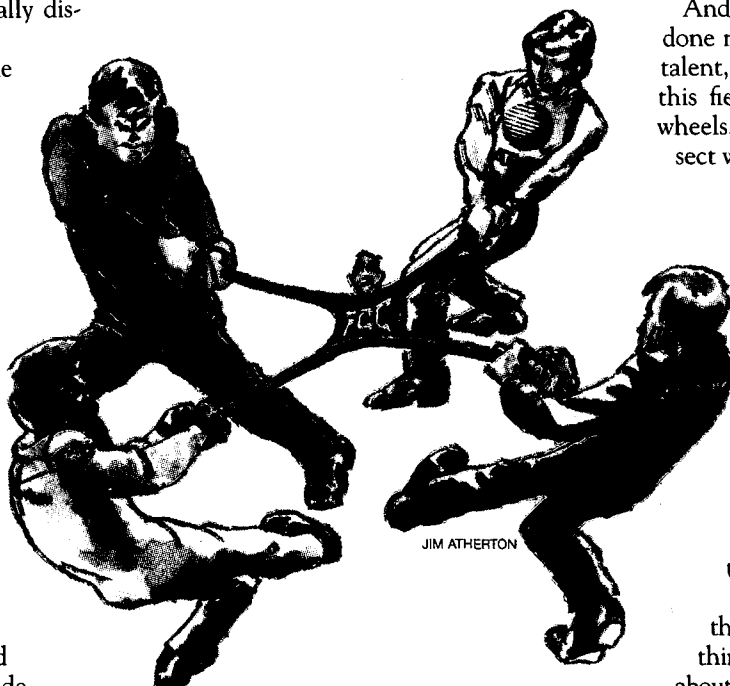
And in fact, some of that is being done now. Let's take advantage of the talent, energy and good work already in this field, and let's not reinvent any wheels. Public demand needs to intersect with the trench warfare for structural regulation—at the agencies and standards bodies, in Congress, in the courts, at public utility and public service commissions. This crucial work will not happen through mass organizing. It requires an enormous amount of technical and legal competence.

Don't forget, the big guys not only have their political lobbyists, they also have their economists, their engineers and their computer geeks.

Inside the Beltway, where I live, there is a stunning group of mini think tanks with deep knowledge about the economics and politics of media. Most of them have a savvy sense

of the complexities of communications policy, work with key stakeholders and regularly assemble coalitions for targeted campaigns. At Public Knowledge, Gigi Sohn is developing a network of arts organizations to support progressive intellectual property policies. At the Center for Digital Democracy, Jeffrey Chester is organizing stakeholders in communities across the nation to demand access to digital bandwidth on cable. In many research universities, exciting programs using new media have been launched. Projects are brewing in law schools and universities, including a joint project between my Center for Social Media and the Independent TV Service (itself a media reform victory) to write a policy primer for media artists. These projects connect constituencies with action.

As digital developments smudge the line between media (yesterday, our TVs) and communication (yesterday, our phones), the question of how we build systems for a democratic future is a big one. Deepening the public's knowledge base about the underpinnings of our communications is good. Mapping the exciting landscape of communications policy projects is important. And the successes and failures of media reform movements so far are worth a much closer look. McChesney and Nichols are walking in a well-worn trench with their rallying call. ■



JIM ATHERTON

Against All Odds

By Eugene McCarraher

Before he married and became a father, my cousin was a gambler's man. A successful banker from Monday to Friday, he spent many a weekend in Atlantic City, where he cast his wealth like a votive offering to the glittering shrines of Fortuna. (Slot machines and roulette wheels were his favorite sites

of devotion.) Though perennially broke, this Reaganaut champion of Wall Street and the Pentagon returned from the games as hopeful as ever. (He also invested and lost a pile in the euphoric "new economy.")

Something for Nothing: Luck in America

By Jackson Lears

Viking

392 pages, \$27.95

was a gambler?" Lears beckons toward and occasionally enters an uncharted realm of cultural criticism. In every roll of the dice, he sees a question posed to the unknown—and maybe beneficent—forces of the universe. It's a view we'd do well to consider as we face a future in which imperial violence is a cruel terrestrial certainty.

As any of his readers and students (like myself) could tell you, Lears has spent his entire career addressing the moral and religious issues at the heart of our cultural history. His first book, *No Place of Grace* (1981), traced the emergence of "antimodernism" in

industrial capitalism, the more sensitive and articulate members of the Northeastern bourgeoisie feared the corrosive impact of rationalization, secularization and technological development—the trinity of "disenchantment" identified by Max Weber.

Unable to allay their distress by embracing Protestant verities, an array of Victorian malcontents—epitomized by William James, Vida Scudder and Henry Adams—embarked on quests for moral meaning that held a twofold historical significance. On the one hand, Lears argued, the arts and crafts revival, the resurgence of medievalist fantasy, and interest in Catholic religious culture voiced a powerful dissent from capitalist modernity. On the other hand, when severed from politics and religious tradition, they fostered therapeutic forms of cultural authority for an emerging elite of managers, professionals and other experts. When bereft of moral and spiritual ideals other than "release from inhibitions"—the Victorian precursor to the conquest of cool—Lears argued that antimodernism could be "more easily accommodated to newer, more permissive modes of cultural hegemony."

Though indebted to the Marxist cultural theory of Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams' sympathetic account of Anglo-Catholicism also marked respect for the critical power of religion. Indeed, from the book's title (taken from T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday") to its last line—"Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief," from the Gospel of Mark—he suggested that the left could not dismiss religious faith as simply or ultimately reactionary. Even more than Christopher Lasch—then beginning his journey from

Marxism and psychoanalysis to populism and Protestant theology—Lears saw religion as a treasury of hope, not part of a past that lay like nightmare.

In *Fables of Abundance* (1994), a cultural history of American advertising, Lears ventured further into religious matters. Far more than an instrument of hege-



late-Victorian America. Alluding to "signs of spiritual sterility" and "moral hollowness" in the contemporary West, Lears looked to an older WASP elite for the sources of both the malady and the cure. Among the prime beneficiaries of

You sound more like a mystic than a capitalist, I remarked. "What's the difference?" he replied. Though his fondness for casinos has abated, he makes an occasional pilgrimage back to the one-armed bandits, and he plays the stock market even after the dot-com crash.

As Jackson Lears might observe, my cousin embodies the conflicted convictions about grace, luck and fortune that have pervaded American culture. In his wide-ranging, big-hearted and brilliant new book, Lears probes the ambivalence Americans have shown toward the masterless world of chance, from sacred bundles and faro banks to atonal music and abstract expressionism. But *Something for Nothing* is much more than a capacious piece of scholarship. Asking, like Ralph Ellison's invisible man, "What if history