

Moving the Media Revolution Forward: Interview with Robert McChesney

by Sheri Herndon
IMC-Seattle

4:19pm Mon Aug 28 '00

As a political movement, where do we need to go to increase our chances of becoming a viable force in society today, to actually achieve the goals of class equality, social justice, environmental justice and true democracy. In this interview, Robert McChesney argues for progressives to do media reform as part of their political work, for everyone to include media reform as part of their political work who is interested in democracy.

McChesney teaches at the University of Illinois, is co-editor of the *Monthly Review* and is well known for his books on media and democracy. He's written *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-35*, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* and he recently wrote a book with John Nichols called *It's the Media Stupid!*, published by the Open Pamphlet Series. I caught up with Bob by phone on August 15 while he was working in New York City.

SH: Last night (8/14/00), we had a bomb threat here at Patriotic Hall in Los Angeles which prevented the Independent Media Center from uploading the live satellite program "Crashing the Party". The LAPD also evacuated the entire building with the exception of the 6th floor (which is where the IMC is located). The evacuation also included the Shadow Convention which has been on the first floor. What has the coverage been like from your vantage point in New York City?

RM: I haven't been able to do a comprehensive look but I read the *New York Times* and I've watched a lot of TV coverage, and the coverage has been pretty minimal. What little bit I've seen has been largely congratulatory toward the police for cleaning up the nuisance of having protesters or demonstrators muddying the waters of the conventions in Los Angeles. I think we can generalize starting with Seattle last November, going through the A16 demonstrations in Washington and then the Republican convention in Philadelphia to now -- it's quite clear that there's been an extraordinary attack on basic civil liberties, the right to gather, the right to protest. And what's most extraordinary about it is the miniscule press interest in this stunning attack on basic core freedoms. To the point where you have to wonder if we have the right to assemble anymore in any meaningful sense, or are we in a situation now where to the media, the commercial media, the corporate media, the right to assemble is simply something we talk about as a right we have but we don't really want to let anyone exercise it unless they are 200 miles from any other people.

SH: Did you actually get to see anything about the situation at Patriotic Hall?

RM: No I saw nothing about the Patriotic Hall. What I did see was some discussion and clips on several different channels about cops who were involved in beating up some

protesters and arresting a bunch of them, immediately outside the Staples Center itself. The presentation on all the channels was that this was started by protesters throwing rocks at cops and the cops then took appropriate action thereafter to wipe them out as much as possible. The Imas show on MSNBC interviewed in fact one of the protesters and after the protester talked about the cops' misbehavior, Imas started ridiculing him as being some sort of imbecile to think anything else would happen or should happen to anyone who dared to demonstrate in Los Angeles.

It is truly extraordinary statement about what exactly our rights are in this society and how concerned the corporate media are in protecting basic first amendment rights for citizens.

SH: That brings us to the broad topic of media reform. In your book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, the last chapter of the book is dedicated to left politics and media. In that chapter, you set forth some clear proposals for steps forward for media reform. Can you describe those for us?

RM: The basic argument and critique is simply that our media system is basically the province of a few very large firms and it's set up to serve shareholders and managers and advertisers. The economic interests of these concerns is that they try to maximize profit. In doing so, it does grave damage to the legitimate democratic requirements we need from a media system in our society if it's to be remotely close to self-governing. And so the solutions that I lay out are to try to minimize or reduce the power of Wall Street and Madison Avenue and increase the power of everyone else.

And the core of the argument is premised in the idea and I think the factual basis, that our media system is not the result of a bunch of hard working entrepreneurs competing in some free marketplace; our media system is based largely on governmental laws, regulations and subsidies that were made in our name but without our informed consent, that created these huge semi-monopolies that dominate TV, films, broadcasting and newspaper publishing. Therefore, it's the right of the people to intervene to make laws, regulations and subsidies to create a more just, fair and open media system. And along those lines, I do recommend several things that we should work on. Some of them range from very difficult and long term, while some range from not very difficult and immediate.

One thing that's really pressing right now is the whole microbroadcasting situation, which is a tremendous advance that we won in the late 1990's into the beginning of this decade. Right now it's up in the air because the corporate broadcasters, the commercial broadcasters are using their power to try to crush it in Congress. But I don't think they're going to be able to, it'll just have to go back underground. We've got a situation now where we have the technology to have a very high quality, accessible radio broadcasting system. But we have laws set up basically to serve the market monopolies of a handful of huge radio owning companies. So microradio is one of the issues that we can fight on and we're organizing around, that I think we can win on and I think eventually we will win.

There's a bunch of other ones as well. I think we need to organize for genuine public broadcasting in the US. By that I mean nonprofit, noncommercial broadcasting aimed at the entire population, not the quasi-commercial programming aimed at the sliver of the upper middle class, that only does programming that the commercial interests can't make money

off of, which is what basically public broadcasting means in the US.

I think there are a number of other mechanisms. I think we need to demand things from commercial broadcasters for the use of the spectrum, and the things I would immediately we say we should demand of them is that they not run any television paid political ads which basically urinate on our political culture, they do nothing of value. I think we should make a condition of a broadcast license that they will not accept paid political advertising on radio, or television or cable. Likewise, I think we should not have advertising to children under 12. It's obscene, it's not done in many countries of the world -- Sweden, Greece, Norway; we shouldn't permit it here. It's outrageous what we do to children. And I think we should take all the commercials off television news as well and divest those from the owners and make them the property of collectives of journalists who would run the news and a percentage of the revenues of the station would go automatically to the budget that would be under the control of journalists not the advertising department or the owners.

So those are some of the things that I recommend. There are some things that can be done at the local level too. A lot of this is a local struggle, but some of it's national and some of it's global.

My core argument really is that it's not the people who are just working on media reform. My core argument is that the people who are concerned about human rights issues, issues of social justice, the environment, need to understand that unless you change the media you never really ultimately are going to change anything. It's inconceivable that we could have a fair and just society with our current media system. But they go together. You don't do one and then the other. So it means that if you're working on any sort of human rights or social justice issue, you've got to make media activism, media reform part of your program and support it.

And I think in tandem, hand in hand, there's a possibility that we can do great things. Because my sense from personal experience is that a significant base of Americans now, much larger than 10 or 20 years ago, that are open to ideas that, 'Yeah the media system needs reform, the media system is really screwed up and it's not doing the job.' And the 2000 presidential election is case in point as basically we're getting stenography of the mainstream politicians and almost no coherent presentation of the main social issues whatsoever.

SH: So here we are at the Democratic National Convention here in Los Angeles, do you feel that any of these proposals are out there in our current two party system?

RM: No, they aren't at all. But at the same time, there are cracks in the fissure so to speak for the first time. We've got some members of the Democratic party who are interested in these issues and may sponsor some legislation along some of these lines. People like Jesse Jackson, Jr. who has really come forward, or Paul Wellstone of Minnesota who has come forward and there are many other members. So I think there's some hope on the horizon.

But the one thing that's crucial is that we're not going to win anything in this struggle without popular support. Having all the best arguments in the world so you can win all the debating society awards isn't going to get you anything in this debate, cause you're going up

against spectacular organized money. And what we need to fight organized money, as Saul Alinsky says, is organized people -- we've *got* to be organized. We'll have people in Congress, but they're going to be at the end of the process, or at the middle of it.

What we need now is to organize popular support, because then and only then do we have a chance of actually winning. But I do think it's possible because I know when I have a chance to talk to people, really across the political spectrum, there is a real understanding that the sort of media system we have now makes a mockery of what we need in a self-governing society.

SH: As you have talked about, we need this reform at a structural level and it has to be part of a broader movement to democratize all of our core institutions of society. Yet what I'm seeing so often is that within the coalitions, the grassroots organizations and the efforts toward the different issues, there is still not an awareness of the necessity of media reform -- central to those individual platforms and constituencies -- that you're talking about.

RM: You're absolutely right. It's very frustrating. This gets back to the need to really organize on it. Take for example, the Nader campaign. I'm a supporter of Nader's campaign. I hold him in tremendous respect and he's probably been more than any public figure instrumental in calling attention to the corruption of our media policy making, to the corruption of our system. Yet if you looked on his list of the core issues he's working on, it's not listed. It's not listed not because it isn't a core issue to Nader, but because he doesn't sense there's enough people organizing around it.

Likewise, Bernie Sanders, the independent member of Congress from Vermont for years would mention media reform as one of the two or three main issues that he was working on. It was really important. But I've noticed in the last year or two that he's dropped it in his writings as one of the core issues. And I think, again, it's because people aren't pressing it. He's not going to lead a parade if no one's lining up. So I think what we need to do is organize these groups, we have to kick them in the but. Because once some of these progressive politicians sense that there are people organizing on it, then I think they'll say, O.K. then, I'll go out on the limb. But we have to put some troops in the street to have any success.

SH: In the last chapter, what I found really interesting and hopeful as well, is looking at the global situation and the making headway on media democracy issues in other countries. What are some examples and some models for the kind of telecommunications policy that you're advocating that we're seeing in other parts of the world.

RM: In the new pamphlet that I wrote with John Nichols, called *It's the Media Stupid!*, which just came out a few days ago -- the whole pamphlet makes that argument. The middle part of it says Look, the rest of the world increasingly has a media system like the United States, dominated in fact by the very same companies in most cases. And what we saw that was striking is that it's becoming a much larger political issue in many countries where it's understood that if you're talking about democracy you've got to have a democratic media system. The two simply cannot be separated. So as you have increasingly a corporate run commercially marinated media system with garbage-can journalism reflecting the business class perspective, you can't have a genuine democracy.

If you go to Sweden, or India or Brazil or New Zealand^[1] or Australia, what you're finding is that progressive anti-neoliberal, anti-business democratic parties are making media reform -- in many cases -- one of their two or three core issues. In Sweden, for example, the Left Party, 12% in the last national election (it just started a few years ago), is a spin-off of feminist and environmentalist and refugees from the Social Democratic Party. What they found is that in the Left Party platform, media reform isn't in there; it's in the preamble to their platform. It's in the first paragraph that you cannot have a democracy with a corporate run commercially marinated media system. That has to be changed. That's just an assumption, a presupposition.

What we're seeing is when people make it a political issue in New Zealand and Australia and other countries, it's a popular issue with voters. It's an issue you can win on. And once you get it in play, the conservative mainstream and pro-business parties have a much harder time going about the business of serving up subsidies and goodies to the corporate media, because once it gets in the light of public debate, people don't like that. In my view, in the United States, what we need to learn is that as soon as we make it an issue our chances of winning go way up. As soon as it gets out in the light of the day, the ability of the government to serve over \$50 billion dollars in spectrum to a handful of corporations is going to diminish it because people will never put up with it once they know about it.

Which is why these corporate media do everything in their power to keep it quiet. One of the things I study historically, through to the present day, is the obsession of the National Association of Broadcasters and the commercial media to keep any sort of Congressional or public debates over media policy out of the public eye, to push them into the FCC, get them behind closed doors, never let the public understand that it's their right to do whatever they want, it's their right to make these decisions. Make them think that this is the natural system and the only debate is whether GE or Rupert Murdoch gets a bigger slice of the pie.

SH: What's the relationship between the NAB and the Democratic Party?

RM: The NAB is a trade association of the commercial radio and television broadcasters. And like all big trade associations that represents corporate interests, with only a couple of exceptions, it works both sides of the street and lavishes funds on both Republicans and Democrats. So I think some members of the Democratic party receive a great deal of money from them as do the Republicans. I don't know if they have a stronger relationship with the Democrats than the Republicans.

To its credit yesterday morning (August 14), on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* was the headline story on all the money Gore's receiving from the corporate media, from telecomm and computer companies in his campaign. They are burying this guy in money. They've already buried Bush in money. Both these guys are totally bought and paid for. There's absolutely no way in earth we should expect either of them to do anything good on these issues. In fact they are both going hat in hand to Wall Street, to the corporate media offices in midtown Manhattan and Silicon Valley, saying I can do more than the other guy to make you guys rich, so give me money. That's their motto to these people. They dress it up in other verbiage for the general public, but that's what they are saying behind closed doors. That's the range of debate we have in our mainstream political culture on media and communication. Which candidate can make these 20 companies richer than the other one.

That's what we're entitled to choose from.

SH: Going back to the first question, which is here we are in Patriotic Hall and we were just about to go live with our satellite program which would show a lot of different perspectives for people all across the country about what has been happening in the streets, and somehow a bomb in our parking lot kept us out of access to the satellite truck, and they kept it that way for several hours. It's all somewhat suspicious circumstances. So one looks at, What's our right to assemble?, What's our right to dissent and say the political party isn't representing us?, What's our right to produce and disseminate independent media? . . .

RM: And it also demands the question, Where the heck are all these self-righteous, self-congratulating corporate journalists who claim that they are in favor of a free press and they are the first ones to pat themselves on the back? They are a bunch of frauds. They are only interested in the First Amendment insofar as to protect their monopoly over the American Mind. They show no interest in it as a *bona fide* real issue in this country for people like yourself, for people at the Independent Media Center who are really on the front lines doing journalism against powerful interests. This is exactly the sort of stuff we're trained to think is what the First Amendment is all about.^[2] And here where it's being crushed by the sort of mechanisms we associate with Indonesia and Nigeria and military governments, they are nowhere to be found. They are in having cocktails and hob-nobbing with the same lobbyists and the same political hotshots that they should be reporting on critically.

SH: In your last chapter, you define capitalism as the most sophisticated form of class society. You go on to say that the economy should be subservient to democracy and to the will of the people. What would it look like if we actually had something like that?

RM: First, there are two important points there, philosophically. Capitalism is a class society and that is something you are not allowed to say, it's sort of an off-limits point ideologically. But read an introductory textbook to economics written by Milton Friedman -- the most blatant ideologue of capitalism -- it is acknowledged at the outset there are a very small number of people who, for whatever reason, usually because of inheritance, have what is called capital. And there's a very huge number of people who don't. And the difference between them is that the people who have capital don't have to work and the people who don't have it have to. Right there what you have is a presupposition that the whole system is predicated on two very distinct classes. So the foundation of it is a class society. But as I wrote in the book, it's much more sophisticated than a feudal society or a slavocracy or any of the previous forms of class society human beings have experienced.

As for the idea that politics should override economics, that the will of the people should determine the nature of the economic system, that the economic system shouldn't basically determine things or assumption that the only possible course would be capitalistic, that isn't just a radical idea, that's a core premise of liberal thought too. The great liberals who were not socialists, like John Stuart Mill, thought that it was the right of the people to set up whatever type of property system, whatever type of economic system the majority after informed debate wanted. It's only conservatives who argued 'No, the bulk of the people are too dumb, they just have to have capitalism and beat them over the head if they don't understand it.'

But what's happened with liberalists -- their inherent flaw in my view -- is that to protect the great liberal values they cherish of promoting individual development freedoms and rights, they have been unwilling to recognize the conflicts those great liberal freedoms have from the market, from a commercial and capitalist society and take the tough step then of battling corporate capitalism and establishing a more egalitarian and fair economy. I think it can be done. I am not sure exactly how it would look, but I know that we certainly can take steps in the here and now to make our economy vastly more fair and vastly more efficient in a social sense than the economy we have.

SH: What do you think about the role of Nader's campaign and the third party of opening up a more diverse system in this country?

RM: Our electoral laws, combined with our campaign finance auction system of government that we have in this country, make starting third parties extraordinarily more difficult, and add in the corporate media which is extraordinarily hostile to third parties -- especially those to the left of the Democrats, and it makes it seem almost impossible.

Having said that, I am a big supporter of what Nader's doing. I'm working on the campaign. I'll show my colors up front. I'm very excited about what he's doing. The success that Nader has experienced so far where the last poll that came out, the Zogby poll, which is a mainstream poll conducted by the two main parties, the Zogby poll showed Nader at 7% nationally, 13% nationally with people 34 and younger -- 13%! Considering the almost total lack of coverage he gets and the coverage almost never covers Nader himself or his campaign or the Green Party but just how he affects Gore and Gore's state. The popularity he's got is nothing less than astonishing, he's getting 3-4 times the support of Buchanan who is literally bathing in press coverage by comparison.

Again, it's a sign to me that, given a chance, the people of this country are vastly more progressive than the corporate commercial media political system is willing to acknowledge or can acknowledge and that there are real chances for us if we organize to move this country in a progressive direction. I think some good evidence of it is how both the Republicans (believe it or not) and the Democrats -- when they're actually trying to get votes -- run so much farther to the left than their actual policies. Even the Republicans are coming across against racism and for justice and for social welfare and the Democrats sound like a bunch of Socialists when they're trying to get votes. Of course, once they're in power, they park that rhetoric at the door.

SH: If we actually were organizing more with media reform across the board amongst our constituencies and issues -- and seeing that as something that links all the issues -- what's the possibility of getting this more into the Nader campaign so we can perhaps broaden it and bring in more people?

RM: I think it's in the Nader campaign, it's real possible; it's part of the platform. Nader wrote an introduction to the book I did with Nichols, *It's the Media Stupid!*; he's very keen on these issues, extremely knowledgeable as well. I think as the Green Party and as Nader take off -- not just this year, but I see it as a long-term process -- I see media reform as being an integral part of their campaign and their platform, so I'm very optimistic. I think it's going to happen. The key thing right now, the exciting thing, is to get make this campaign be

as viable as possible this fall. Right now, there might be listeners who say, 'It's going to be tough, I hate Bush and Cheney, they're completely corrupt, so I'm just going to go for Gore.' People really have to think about it because if Nader falters, if his vote total falls down to one or two percent as all the pundits have been predicting, that will be a very bad thing, not just for media reform, but for all social justice work in this country. Because it will be a signal to all the pundits, all the academics, all the political people, 'Hey, the pundits are right -- there is no left in this country, there are no progressive forces. If progressives are willing to vote for Gore and Lieberman, clearly they are not a unit that needs to be respected or taken seriously.' That sends the exact wrong message. We need to send a powerful message that people are going to stand up and not take it anymore.

SH: Regarding the protests that have been on-going since Seattle here in the U.S., but also before Seattle like the J18 event in London and around the world, what is your assessment of the potential of these events and where are they going?

RM: I'm not sure, I don't know where these are going to go, I don't know if anyone does. I'd be interested to know what your thoughts are and what are other people's thoughts are. At some point, you link what's happening on the streets with all sorts of other political activity. It's part of a bigger picture. And the bigger picture ultimately is organizing a force that can become a dominant political force in this country and reshape the direction away from the class inequality and corporate commercial dominance of our society towards social justice and a more humane, more environmentally sound and a fairer society. And that's how I see it, as part of that process.

There's one thing that really excites and is invigorating to me. I'm 47, I came of age in the early 70's. I came of age at the very tail end of a decade of tremendous political activism. But I came of age in a period when being politically active was really becoming frowned upon. Depoliticization was setting in. It was seen as being really uncool to care about politics, to care about social justice, and it was seen as a really dull thing, a boring thing, a tedious thing, a grind to do it, to demonstrate, to organize. What I see is that's finally changing. We're really turning around. I think we've got a change in this country, I don't know how far it's going to go. But I'm really excited when I travel now in the last couple of years when I see the enthusiasm for social justice, the willingness to ask tough questions, to take chances -- that hasn't been there for 30 years. Where it's going to go I don't know, I'd like to think we're at the beginning of something very big and I'm going to do everything I can to blow on the flames.

SH: Thank you for taking the time out. I know you're in NYC and doing some work there, so I really appreciate this.

RM: It's my pleasure. Keep up the great work and hug everyone there and tell them I really love what they're doing.

Footnotes

1. See the inspiring principles *and successes* of New Zealand's Alliance Party (<http://www.alliance.org.nz/fhome.html>), including their Broadcasting Policy:

Over the past decade we have treated broadcasting as primarily a commercial activity. This perspective is ill conceived and naive. Broadcasting is a much more complex activity than this, comprising technologies, social and cultural practices, cultural forms, a set of industries in its own right, and dynamic institutional forms which are continuously evolving. But above all it is an idea. This idea is that a society's broadcasting media, as the most important of all its communications enterprises, should serve the public interest. The Alliance re-affirms this principle as central to our approach to broadcasting.

See **Alliance on broadcasting**, Jim Anderton MP *Sun Sep 26 1999*
<http://www.alliance.org.nz/releases/1999/00brxxxx@260999ar938310461.html>

2. See The First Amendment and the Mythology of Commercial Broadcasting, from the 1997 Spry Memorial Lecture, The Mythology of Commercial Broadcasting and the Contemporary Crisis of Public Broadcasting, by Dr. Robert W. McChesney, December 1997.
<http://www.ratical.org/co-globalize/RMmythCB.html>

From www.robertmcchesney.com:

Robert W. McChesney is a research professor in the Institute of Communications Research and the Graduate School of Information and Library Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. From 1988 to 1998 he was on Journalism and Mass Communication faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. McChesney earned his Ph.D. in communications at the University of Washington in 1989. His work concentrates on the history and political economy of communication, emphasizing the role media play in democratic and capitalist societies. He is the author of *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-35*, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, and most recently, *It's the Media Stupid!*, with John Nichols. A paperback edition of *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (2000) with a new preface by the author is now available. The video of recent lecture on *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* is available in Real Audio Format.