PREFACE

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This volume is a testament to the emergence of media reform as a concrete area of political activity and as an emerging and important field of intellectual inquiry and scholarly research. Inside these covers you will find a heterogeneous collection of essays by some of the leading media reform activists and scholars of our times. In this preface I offer a few observations on the emergence of media reform and how to consider it.

Communication and media systems have come to play a central role in contemporary societies. Media reform is premised on a simple notion: “the problem of the media” (McChesney 2004). This phrase refers to the fact that communication and media systems are *always* the result of government policies, rules, regulations, and subsidies, both direct and indirect. There is no natural media system; it is always created. It is a problem to be solved, like an algebraic equation, with the difference being that there is no “right” answer, only a range of answers that reflect different values and priorities.

That does not mean the existing political economy does not greatly influence what a media system will look like. A capitalist society will have pressure to adopt a commercial system. But, as the stark differences in broadcasting systems adopted by various capitalist nations demonstrates, there remains a certain range in how the media system can be structured. Most important, there is no “default” position. Even if one wishes to have a profit-driven communication system in a capitalist society, it requires extensive government policymaking and involvement to make it practical.

Put another way, media and communication have significant power and influence in society, and the systems are the result of government policies. Then

the question is where do these policies come from? Political deliberation and debate. That is the nucleus of the media atom. If one wishes to change the media, one needs to change the system and that means engaging in the political work to change the policies that create the system. That is the stuff of media reform. One could conclude then that the more democratic a nation, the more democratic the media policymaking process would be, and the more likely a resulting media system would reflect popular concerns.

It sounds pretty sexy at this point, but, in fact, media policymaking has generally been a boring political backwater for much of its history. The reason is that once media systems get established with successful enterprises and practices they tend to be immune to any sort of fundamental change. Media *reform*, in such a context, generally becomes the more generic field of *media policy*; it involves marginal changes or changes that suit the interests of the dominant players and that have little or no appeal to the general public. Policy “debates” deal with technocratic and administrative issues, or seemingly minor squabbles between self-interested commercial parties. To the extent the public knows anything about media policy issues—and the public usually is in the dark—the prospective reforms likely appear inconsequential. It makes more sense to put one’s energies elsewhere.

Even in ostensibly democratic societies, the media policymaking process tends to be the domain of wealthy and self-interested elites. In a word, it tends to be corrupt. The difference between media reform and mainstream media policy studies has little to do with the subject but everything to do with attitude. Mainstream media policy research—the kind often found in business schools, law schools, and communication programs that want to lure the funding that goes to business schools and law schools—makes its peace with the status quo and happily operates inside the parameters that are given. Media reform, on the other hand, works to break down the barriers that limit public participation and the range of alternatives. It questions the integrity of the process as a key part of its work. Only in an insane world is the former termed *scientific* and the latter *ideological*.

Media reform becomes imperative when there is a *critical juncture*. This term has been appropriated from historical sociology and refers to calamitous periods when the status quo is in crisis and fundamental change is likely to happen (McChesney 2007). The only question is what sort of change is likely to happen? The notion of critical junctures was meant for societies as a whole; they referred to periods of great social upheavals, like the 1930s or the 1960s. Applied to media systems, critical junctures refer to those periods when media systems are in crisis and on the verge of being replaced. This most often occurs with the development of a radical and sweeping new communication technology, like radio and television broadcasting or the Internet. Old industries are threatened and new industries have yet to emerge. What the

state does will largely determine who will win and what values and practices will be privileged.

At moments like these, the options before society tend to be many, as there are fewer and weaker entrenched interests to dominate deliberations. If a society is also in broader social and political turmoil, the options grow that much larger, as the ruling elites stand on weaker ground. The outcome can go a long way toward influencing how society will develop.

By this framework, for example, the United States had media-related critical junctures with the nation's founding and constitution, the emergence of professional journalism in the early twentieth century, and the establishment of radio broadcasting in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Most nations had their own critical junctures with the emergence of broadcasting. Many newly liberated "third-world" nations had them in the 1960s and 1970s, where new technologies met traditional patterns of colonial domination. Indeed, the movement for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was the result of this critical juncture.

It is during critical junctures that media reform moves from the shadows into the full light of day. It was during the critical juncture of the 1960s that Raymond Williams, with the aim of influencing Labour Party policies, wrote a series of pioneering books, pamphlets, and articles that remain breathtaking for their prescience. Williams made a powerful case that the "means of communication" were central to advanced societies and how they were structured was a fundamental political issue. It would go a long way toward determining how democratic a nation would be (Foster and McChesney 2013).

Williams highlighted the deep flaws within a commercial media system, and he advocated removing culture and communication to a significant extent from the capital accumulation process. He regarded the battle to democratize the communication system, to create well-funded, independent, uncensored, participatory media as the foundation of a democratic society. But Williams was more than a democrat; he was a socialist, and this drove his treatment of media and communication. Williams argued that a vibrant independent participatory media was not merely a requirement for democracy, but for socialism. His was a direct critique of the Soviet model of one-party dictatorship with a state-run monopoly media.

Williams was first among a coterie of Western Left intellectuals who pondered the striking importance of media, communication, and culture by beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. These writers included Ralph Miliband, C. Wright Mills, E. P. Thompson, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy and Herbert Marcuse. It defined the importance of media to the New Left. When, however, the New Left collapsed and was replaced by the triumph of neoliberalism, the notion of radically transforming media, not to mention society, became academic. And in the academy, research that went against the neoliberal tide

was hardly encouraged. In this context media policymaking, which enjoyed a burst of popular political activity in the 1960s and 1970s, returned to its status of being a by-invitation-only playground for political elites, commercial interests and their allies.

This all began to change quickly by the turn of the century. Indeed, we are now in the midst of the mother of critical junctures, at least for media and possibly for all of society, and that explains the explosion in media reform. I was involved in forming the US media reform group Free Press in 2003, which surprised me and everyone else with how much support it attracted. The US experience demonstrates that there is a wellspring of popular interest in a number of media issues. It also demonstrates how utterly powerful and determined commercial interests have become.

The primary reason for the media critical juncture is the Internet and the digital revolution. It has simultaneously turned nearly all traditional media industries upside down and created both crises and extraordinary opportunities. It has alleviated and tremendously aggravated the traditional problems of commercial media systems, the kinds that proliferate.

The current critical juncture includes two particular recent developments that deserve mention, as they pose daunting challenges to scholars and proponents of media reform. First, with the Internet, communication has been insinuated in the bone marrow of modern capitalism, and the market into the sinews of everyday life, far beyond anything that ever existed previously. It is in part that the business logic leads to a corporate (as well as governmental) surveillance that makes every possible moment pregnant with the possibility of commercial exploitation. Even more important, the Internet's vast commercial bounty has been captured by a small number of gigantic firms that are monopolistic by economic standards (McChesney 2013). By June 2014 there were 32 publicly traded US corporations with a market value of at least \$125 billion. Fourteen of these 32 firms were primarily Internet firms, most of them monopolies in the sense that John D. Rockefeller had a monopoly with Standard Oil in the late nineteenth century. Just 15 years ago observers like myself bemoaned the implications of having a half-dozen media conglomerates ranking among the 200 largest firms in the United States. That looks like a golden age of small-scale competition today.

What this means is that these firms have almost unimaginable political power along with mind-boggling economic power. On any issue that affects them—and few issues do not—when they are in agreement they will be an unbeatable force, at least in the United States. It is a direct challenge to almost any conventional notion of the type of economy that is compatible with a credibly democratic society.

Media reformers ignore these developments at their peril. The global capitalist economy is stagnant and there appears to be little hope for much of a life for

large sectors of the population (Foster and McChesney 2012). Inequality is growing to dangerous and unacceptable levels, by nearly any standard besides Ayn Rand's. Democratic practices are under pressure to conform to the needs of investors. I believe that there needs to be a recognition that the creation of credible democracy increasingly demands we consider moving past capitalism as we know it (McChesney 2015). Where that leads exactly, I do not know. But I do know if we do not broach the subject for fear of antagonizing powerful interests, we are not being honest intellectuals.

Second, commercial journalism is in freefall collapse and disintegration. American-style professional journalism always had its flaws—most significantly, a reliance upon political and economic elites to set the agenda and the range of legitimate debate—but at its peak, it also provided for significant resources to cover communities and politics. It began to crumble with commercial pressure to lowball editorial budgets to increase profits in the merger wave of the 1980s and 1990s. But the Internet, by removing advertising as a credible source of revenues, has permanently ended the commercial model of popular journalism aimed at the entire population. I have examined this crisis and its implications (McChesney and Nichols 2010). The bottom line is this: if there is going to be credible widespread democratic journalism, it will require significant public investment and very wise policymaking; it is a priority for media reform.

With regard to journalism, media reform is best understood as being concerned with providing a core element of the infrastructure of democracy. This refers to those institutions and processes that empower citizens to be effective members of a democratic polity, where power emanates from the decisions made by an informed citizenry. This means not only guaranteeing the right of all adults to vote, but also guaranteeing that the vote matters. This means taking money out of politics such that “one person, one vote” replaces “one dollar, one vote.” It means restructuring the electoral governing system to enhance public participation. This means eliminating corruption; that is, lessening the inordinate power of the wealthy and privileged in the budgetary and decision-making processes. It also means having a credible system of universal public education (Nichols and McChesney 2013).

And, most important, it means devoting the public resources required to provide a truly great independent news media. An informed citizenry is the foundation of democracy and there is no route to such an outcome that does not require a strong news media system, or communication system writ large. This is the framing mechanism for the work of media reform.

Understood this way, media reform is not a partisan movement. The movement is all about establishing the institutions and rules for effective self-government whatever the country and whatever the specific and most pressing challenge to a democratic media system. Whether the results of effective self-

government go left or right, socialist or free market conservative, or some combination thereof will be the result of the system working, as it should be.

At the same time, the democratic infrastructure of the United States and elsewhere is not merely atrophying, nor is it merely being neglected—it is under sustained attack. Those making the attack know full well what they are doing and its significance. There are powerful forces—generally comprised of corporations and the wealthy—that benefit from the status quo and prefer the system as it is. A world where the wealthy guide the ship of state, where the government budget is a private feeding trough, where there is precious little journalism, and where most people rationally tune out politics is A-OK with them. It is not, however, OK with anyone else, nor should it be. When it comes to participatory democracy, media reform is anything but neutral or agnostic.

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