

# Mass Media and the Corruption of Democracy

By Liane Casten Chicago Media Watch

It was a Thursday night. I'm in bed, half asleep, about 11:30 PM with the remote gadget in my hand and I'm cruising the tube. I'd already seen the "salute" to John Wayne re-runs on cable and was not about to watch a thoroughly amateurish attempt to make a Sci-Fi movie into anything more than a diversion for ten-year olds. My remote caught another station and there standing in front of a live audience was some long-haired, shaggy, blue-jeaned performer who looked like my memory of George Carlin. Remember him? He's supposed to be a comedian.

While I only caught the last few minutes, I did catch his message. "Don't vote!" he was screaming at the audience clearly gobbling up his every word. "Then, if we don't vote, we can't say we're the ones responsible for the mess. If you do vote, then you're responsible for putting those assholes in office." And then he concluded with the following, "Me, when I stay home and masturbate, at least I'll have something to show for it folks." And then Carlin made a series of hand motions in the general vicinity of his crotch. And the audience was standing on its feet, clapping as if this comedian had created a painless dentist drill.

The show was over. Immediately, Click on a commercial, a preview first of an x-rated movie exposing a great deal of bare female flesh, and then a preview of another movie: the menacing picture of a black-haired, fierce, red-lipped woman with a gun pointed dead center.

This my friends is our culture. Forget "Lassie Come Home" reruns. Carlin's presentation was not an isolated moment, but part of an ominous trend that has begun to define who we are and what kind of people we are becoming: base, alienated, violent, lacking in civility, civic spirit or a sense of responsibility, deeply cynical -- and yet very hungry for something -- however that something is defined.

Years ago, when I was growing up, my parents would take me and my brother to the home of our maternal grandmother, an amazing turn of the century woman who migrated to Chicago as a young, recently married bride. She taught me how to knit and crochet, and told me how during World War I, she rolled bandages for the war effort in the old country -- Czechoslovakia. She quoted with great emotion the poet Goethe extensively but had only gone to primary school, I listened to her tales about her husband, Grandpa Rudy, who got up at 4:00 am to go by streetcar to the factory by 5:00 am to stoke the fires in order warm the place for the workers who came at 6 am -- so they could start making the dresses and blouses which eventually fed, housed and clothed a great, great many people.

I loved those tales: they were about hard work, commitment, a sense of duty to those who helped make the company grow, and deep gratitude that this family had come to America. But now, for the first time in human history -- thanks to unprecedented media technology, most children are born into homes where most of the stories do not come from their grandparents, parents, communities, schools, churches, or synagogues with their own stories to tell, but from a handful of media conglomerates with something to sell. The cultural environment of the 1980s and 1990s is defined by a system of symbols, logos, images, words, jingles, concepts, pat answers to complex problems, promises of instant gratification, stories -- created by others -- and value systems that serve to cultivate much of who we are as a people, defining what we think and do and how we conduct our affairs.

Million dollar public relations and advertising budgets cover up and misdirect the public's attention away from the criminal behavior of many offending corporations. We live virtually our entire lives within this environment, locked into systems and programmed opportunities to change channels, but not to exchange ideas, locked into pre-ordained perceptions and emotional reactions -- without ever touching reality. Prime time TV has us believe there's a murder between each commercial.

And while television channels proliferate and new technologies pervade our homes and offices, at the same time mergers and bottom-line pressures shrink creative alternatives, reduce diversity of content and concentrate control in a few hands. With hundreds of cable channels, we have less and less to think about, more and more variations of the same. Media are coalescing into a seamless, integrated cultural environment, depriving all of us of civic debate or even a meaningful spiritual connection. In fact, the Christian Right has co-opted and redefined spirituality, using the media as a power base to raise millions from thousands and thousands of very hungry people.

At this point, mass media is a shared garbage dump of mental and spiritual pollution, depriving us all of opportunities to ask tough questions, communicate our deepest fears or celebrate and not deride or fear our vast diversity. Audiences, basely entertained and driven only to the marketplace, are suffering from a national lobotomy.

Some might protest: but there are talk shows. Well, I'm not talking about Rush Limbaugh -- clearly a media coward and liar since he screens all his questions and allows no debate, or former Watergate felon G. Gordon Liddy -- for whom there is precious little rebuttal on the airwaves. I'm talking about those that pretend intellectual challenge on TV -- even Public TV. These talk shows offer far more style than substance, more empty posturing and hot air than true debate since the majority of the experts are deliberately chosen from the far right, or at best from the center of the political spectrum. A few luminary talk experts and reporters even worked for the CIA before doubling or tripling their salaries by serving up their opinions for the media masters.

Where are spokespersons from labor, from the newly unemployed, from poor women barely surviving on the \$8,000 a year minimum wage, or from the Latino community -- which is portrayed mostly negatively? Do we get anyone on network TV revealing the hard truth about Bob Dole's indentured relationship with the tobacco industry, or Bill Clinton's deep pocket connection with the incinerator industry, the dirtiest technology for waste disposal going these days?

Turn on the morning TV shows like "Good Morning America" and I can promise you there will be a moment in time -- at the exact same time -- when all three shows will be interviewing an overpaid media critic pontificating on what TV shows will be biting the dust next season. They entertain us by telling us about entertainment -- an effective diversion from the crucial issues regarding this country.

What does that mean for us? The pervasive, over-arching media shapes our language, our ideology, our perceptions of the world, our self-images, our relations with others, our expectations about life and our capacity to participate in community. Our attention is diverted from the basic needs and aspirations of all people. As we drift towards ecological suicide and the silent crumbling of our vital infrastructure, we are diverted away from society's cruel neglect of children, the poor and other vulnerable people -- who can't buy the advertised products. Glamorized media violence desensitizes, terrorizes, and brutalizes us. People are dehumanized, stereotyped, marginalized and stigmatized, especially those outside the mainstream. Media exploits and depersonalizes images of sexuality and sensationalizes stories that incite hate and fear, driving the siege mentality of our cities.

The media oligopolies dominate not only broadcasting, but film making, book publishing, the newspaper business, magazines and the music business, as they are now converging in cyberspace. For example, let's explore just one conglomerate, the S.I. Newhouse empire. Newhouse owns the New Yorker, Self, Details, GQ, Vanity Fair and Parade, along with many other magazines and newspapers round the country. He is the biggest publishing magnate in the U.S. and a major force in Britain. He owns Random House, Knopf, Pantheon, Crown, and Fodor's Travel Guides.

In general the monopoly in magazine holdings alone is enormous; from 1981 to 1988, the number of twenty dominant corporations went to three. The three are: Time Warner, News Corp, and Hearst.

Now let's go to network TV. Despite attempted takeovers, extreme corporate turbulence and declining prime-time viewing, the three television networks -- Capital Cities/ABC, CBS, and NBC -still dominate the field, enjoy the most revenues and great power. GE owns NBC; Westinghouse owns CBS and Disney owns ABC. Let's see them now for what they are. These three do more than control the media; they are silent, truly invisible powerhouses, controlling what they want through a complicated but effective interlocking network of personal contacts with powerful government people, memberships on federal advisory boards, and just plain money. Individual corporations can and do give \$100,000 donations to a special president's council, a gift which guarantees easy access to decision makers. It's not unusual to sink millions of dollars into influencing the government's policies. Again, the corruption of the political process and the eroding of democratic procedures -- out of sight from the average America.

The board of directors of some of these corporations is where the power fans out. Under the law, any director of a company is obliged to act in the interests of his or her own company. Thus, comes a potential conflict when an officer of corporation (A) sits on the board of corporation (B). On behalf of whose interests does this director act?

This kind of power or linkage is an endless chain -- and is the root of many evils. It tends to disloyalty and is a violation of the fundamental law that no man can serve two masters. It is undemocratic, for it rejects the platform: "A fair field and no favors." This collective threat to democracy is coming on several fronts: the homogenized mass media that controls us, and the takeover -- with government compliance -- of the power center by polluting multinational corporations with loyalty to no one but the bottom line. Democracy can't work unless we all have access to a wide range of different sources of reliable information. The mass media deprives us of that access.