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PUBLIC OPINION: BRINGING THE MEDIA BACK IN

Slavko Splichal's article in this issue delivers the striking observation, from Jeremy Bentham, that "only the political function of the prime minister is more important than that of newspaper editors." If we update Bentham by adding to the end of his sentence "and that of television reporters and other journalists," he expresses a perspective that is as telling now as it was in the nineteenth century.

To live in a modern democracy is to be confronted constantly with a force that is, if anything, *more* powerful than any that is formally recognized in offices such as prime minister: the power of the mass media. It is the media that set the boundaries of acceptable action taken by public officials, since within (self-imposed) constraints, it is the personnel of the media who decide what is worthy of being put on the public agenda; how those topics should be framed; which ideas should be included in debate over them; and what should be excluded from it. And it is only through the media that the public learns of what actions a democratic government might take or might already have taken, and the rationales for these actions. Legislators, bureaucrats, and politicians constantly calculate their actions with an eye to their possible exposure, and criticism, by the media—and woe to the calculator who does not take into account, and try to influence, the inherent power of the media to "spin" what they see fit to expose.

Yet the subject of media spin, media agenda setting, and in general,

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media bias, has been left largely to polemicists to explore; empirical and normative scholarship usually treats such bias as if it were nonexistent or unimportant. A glance through the program of the annual American Political Science Association meetings—and, for that matter, a glance through a daily newspaper, or at a nightly news broadcast—will reveal far more attention paid, by both scholars and the media themselves, to the influence on politics of "special interests" or campaign commercials than of the people to whom citizens have no choice but to turn for information that is deemed trustworthy because it is free from at least the obvious partisanship of political commercials: the people who staff the "objective" mass media.

If it is almost a logical truth that the media daily construct our perceptions of political reality, a moment's reflection would reveal why. Walter Lippmann observed in 1922 (53) that because "each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth's surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately," we must each rely on "stereotypes"—ideas, theories—that make sense of the world beyond our direct experience. These stereotypes must reach us from external sources such as the media—or else they must be projected outwards, either from the structure of our minds or from our personal experience, quite conceivably without justification (for how would we know if political reality matches personal experience?). In short, our ideas about the world have to come from somewhere, and that somewhere is, in the modern world, usually the mass media.

Yet the state of public-opinion research suggests little grasp of Lippmann's insight since he published it 81 years ago. Understanding how people behave in modern democracies should require research into the sources of people's stereotypes about the political world, since their political behavior is intended to affect that world; yet such research is exceedingly rare. Political psychologists naturally (and unobjectionably) focus on the internal processing of political information, without paying much heed to where the information comes from. Most of the attention to media bias, meanwhile, takes the form of diatribes such as Bernard Goldberg's *Bias* and Eric Alterman's *What Liberal Media?*, on the one hand; and more empirically careful, but logically incoherent, scaremongering about media ownership purveyed in such works as Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly* (1990) and Robert W. McChesney's *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (1999), on the other.

If anything, the popular works are better than the scholarly ones, inasmuch as the likes of Goldberg and Alterman at least take seriously

the possibility that media bias might *matter*, in that people's conceptions of politics could be affected by stereotypes that shape the information they receive about politics. The scholars, by contrast, while scrupulously documenting the corporate conglomeration of media ownership, seem to infer that this concentration determines the content of media messages—in a manner that would (if it were true) deprive the matter of any interest. How, after all, would the putative corporate manipulators of cultural media figure out the direction in which they should skew the messages broadcast by their companies, if not by means of stereotypes about the world that come to them from the cultural media to which they themselves have been exposed—such as the television they have watched or the newspapers they have read (or the education they have received)?

As Lippmann (1922, 116) put it,

> the ordinary doctrine of self-interest usually omits altogether the cognitive function. So insistent is it on the fact that human beings finally refer all things to themselves,that it does not stop to notice that men's ideas of all things and of themselves are not instinctive. They are acquired.

The grand error of Marxism, and of routine political-science attributions of political decisions to people's demographic characteristics—class, race, gender, place of residence—is to assume that people somehow know what is in their economic, or racial, gender, or whatever interest without the intervention of *ideas* about the nature and legitimacy of those interests, and about which public-policy measures would serve those interests.These ideas have to be "acquired" somehow—for instance, by reading Marx's books, his pamphlets, and other cultural mediators between reality and his followers'theories about it. Yet Marx, and other theorists of "interest" as the basis of political action, allow no place for theories in their own theories.The proletarians (like everyone else) are supposed to figure out what is in their interest from their direct—culturally unmediated—confrontation with (exploitative) reality. They are not supposed to have to read *Capital* before becoming revolutionaries.

Now if, contrary to this materialist theory, culture shapes people's assumptions, and if cultural-media corporate owners are people, then why would it inherently matter whether the mass media were controlled by corporations? Even if (counterfactually) media owners

controlled media content, what would ultimately determine that content is something neither Bagdikian nor McChesney pause to consider except in the most superficial way: the actual political assumptions held by the owners—views that are the products of theories that have been culturally conveyed to them through (among other cultural mediators of reality) media of the sort whose broadcast messages they now arguably control.

To get down to specifics: why should we think that corporate owners force the cultural messages broadcast by their companies to conform either to their class self-interest; or to the interests of the individual corporations that they own—unaffected by cultural influences? Only if we make such assumptions would the content of media messages be determinable by investigating media ownership patterns. Yet these very assumptions, which do all the work in the dire scenarios painted by such scholars as Bagdikian, deprive the scenarios of any significance. To the extent that people could, as per the assumptions, apprehend and act upon the political implications of their interests without the mediation of ideas, then the political behavior of the *consumers* of the mass media would be unaffected by media-broadcast ideas that ran counter to their interests.

Conversely, if media bias matters, it must be because culturally mediated messages affect people's behavior. But in that case, we cannot assume that the content of media messages can be derived from an analysis of the ownership concentration of the institutions that *produce* them, since the producers themselves may have acquired their political ideas from cultural messages that shape their conceptions of their "interests," or that run counter to their pursuit of self-interest.

The media need to be studied for the very reason that books such as Bagdikian's and McChesney's are irrelevant to that study: the shape of the world that democracy empowers us to reshape needs to be related to us in the first place by the cultural media, because its contours are far more complicated than they would be if the political world were the kind of place in which self-interest *simpliciter* ruled, or in which accurate perceptions of the political implications of self-interest—or accurate perceptions of anything else—were *self-evident*.

This issue of *Critical Review* tries to begin redressing the neglect of the media in the contemporary study of politics. Aurelian Craiutu's paper on the French Doctrinaires leads off by showing that, in France at least, thinking about the mass media was more advanced two hundred years ago than it is now. The Doctrinaires held that the elec-

torate had to have good information about the political world if it were to enact wise policies. Therefore—in contrast to both Bentham and Kant, whose theories of public opinion are discussed next by Splichal—the French theorists recognized that if the electorate were dependent on unreliable interpretations of the world, no automatic barometer of "reason, truth, and justice" (such as "self-interest") would render their decisions sound. This recognition led the Doctrinaires to try to limit the electorate to those who were well informed.

In contrast, Bentham assumed that people recognize, and act upon, the political implications of their self-interest, such that the function of the media is simply to report to the people what their government is doing. Since the people will automatically know which public policies are best, they need only be informed about whether legislators are enacting those policies; if legislators are not doing so, simple reporting of what they *are* doing will alert the public, which can then vote the "sinister" legislators out. In Bentham's uncomplicated world, things only go wrong *deliberately*: what are now called "special interests" alone could interfere with the achievement of the self-evident public interest. The possibility that the achievement of the public interest might be frustrated by the less-than-obvious nature of *how* to achieve it escaped Bentham, as it escapes most political commentary nearly 200 years later.

The Fear of Media Conglomeration

That includes Splichal's own preoccupation with corporate ownership of the media. Following Bagdikian and McChesney, he lays out indisputable evidence that corporate consolidation has occurred, but like them, fails to explain why concentrated rather than fragmented media control should concern us. A profit-driven conglomerate will sell different consumers differing messages just as much as would smaller profit-driven media businesses: namely, as much as those consumers can be prompted to listen to those different messages, thereby providing advertisers with audiences. Conversely, if media conglomerates can be expected to bias the content of their media products in the service of their (individual or collective) self-interest, so can smaller media businesses. To the extent that audiences have active preferences for one type of message over another, profit-seeking conglomerates would have to give them what they "demand" as much as smaller businesses,