

The Problem of Journalism: a political economic contribution to an explanation of the crisis in contemporary US journalism

ROBERT W. McCHESNEY *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA*

ABSTRACT *In this article I present a political economic critique of contemporary US journalism, emphasizing the origins and limitations of professional journalism, the commercial attack upon journalism, and the right-wing critique of the liberal media. In my view, the US polity is enmeshed in a deep crisis and the collapse of a viable journalism is a significant factor—but by no means the only one—in explaining the shriveled and dilapidated state of US democracy. A political economic analysis stresses that the reasons for lousy journalism stem not from morally bankrupt or untalented journalists, but from a structure that makes such journalism the rational result of its operations. Hence if we are serious about producing a journalism and political culture suitable to a self-governing society, it is mandatory that there be structural change in the media system. This means explicit and major changes in the public policies that have created and spawned the media status quo.*

KEY WORDS: *Journalism, Democracy, Ownership, Professionalism, Structural Critique, Liberal Media*

Democratic theory generally posits that society needs a journalism that is a rigorous watchdog of those in power and who want to be in power, can ferret out truth from lies, and can present a wide range of informed positions on the important issues of the day. Each medium need not do all of these things, but the media system as a whole should make this caliber of journalism readily available to the citizenry. How a society can construct a media system that will generate something approximating democratic journalism is a fundamental problem for a free society, as powerful interests tend to wish to dominate the flow of information.

In this article I attempt to provide a political economic framework for explaining why contemporary US journalism is such a failure on all three of the above counts. I first look at the rise of professional journalism roughly 100 years ago, and some of the problems for democracy inherent to the manner in which it developed in the United States. I then assess the two-pronged attack on the autonomy of professional journalism that has taken place over the past gener-

ation. In the second section I discuss the commercial attack on professional journalism and in the third section I assess the conservative critique of the “liberal” media. In combination, I argue, these three factors explain the pathetic state of US journalism in the early 21st century. The implications of my argument are that a commitment to anything remotely resembling *bona fide* democracy requires a vastly superior journalism, and we can only realistically expect such a journalism if there are sweeping changes in media policies and structures to make such a journalism a rational expectation.

My article also aspires to demonstrate the importance of political economic analysis to journalism studies. It is commonly thought that the political economic critique of US journalism is centered on looking at how large media corporations, media concentration and advertisers corrupt the public service of journalism, undermine its professionalism, and keep it from being serious and nonpartisan, if not objective. Some critics of the political economic approach argue that the critique is therefore of

limited value, because it has a tendency to overplay its hand, and downplay the importance of professional values in journalism (Hallin, 1994, pp. 11–3; Schudson, 1995, p. 4). These charges are misguided. On the one hand, the notion of professional journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one with an important history. It did not fall from the sky and land in the newsroom of *The New York Times*. On the other hand, it is a political economic critique that best explains the rise and nature of professional journalism as it has come into practice in the United States. Political economy is not the *only* analysis that explains professionalism, but it is indispensable to any analysis.¹ At any rate, the bottom line is clear: grasping the origins and nature of professional journalism is the necessary starting point for any critique of contemporary journalism, political economic or otherwise, that is worth its salt.

The Rise of Professional Journalism

The notion that journalism should be politically neutral, nonpartisan, professional, even “objective,” did not emerge until the 20th century. During the first two or three generations of the republic such notions for the press would have been nonsensical, even unthinkable. The point of journalism was to persuade as well as inform, and the press tended to be highly partisan. The free press clause in the First Amendment to the constitution was seen as a means to protect dissident political viewpoints, as most newspapers were closely linked to political parties. It was understood that if the government could outlaw or circumscribe newspapers, it could effectively eliminate the ability of opposition parties or movements to mobilize popular support. It would kill democracy. What few Americans know is that the government actively subsidized the press through printing well into the 19th century, and postal subsidies to this day. A partisan press system has much to offer a democratic society ... as long as there are numerous well-subsidized media providing a broad range of opinion (Pasley, 2001).

During the 19th century, the logic of newspaper publishing changed from being primarily political, to being primarily commercial. The

press system remained explicitly partisan, but it increasingly became an engine of great profits as costs plummeted, population increased, and advertising—which emerged as a key source of revenues—mushroomed. During the Civil War, President Lincoln faced press criticism—from some newspapers in the Northern states—that would make the treatment of Lyndon Johnson during Vietnam, Richard Nixon during Watergate or Bill Clinton during his impeachment seem like a day at the beach (Maihafer, 2001). A major city like St. Louis, for example, had at least 10 daily newspapers for much of the middle to late 19th century. Each newspaper would tend to represent the politics of the owner and if someone was dissatisfied with the existing choices, it was not impossible to launch a new newspaper. By contemporary standards, it was a fairly competitive market.

But it was only a matter of time before there would be a conflict between the commercial economics of the press and its explicitly partisan politics. It became a growing problem during the Gilded Age. Following the logic of accumulation, the commercial press system became less competitive and ever more clearly the domain of wealthy individuals, who usually had the political views associated with their class. Commercialism also fostered corruption, as newspapers turned to sensationalism and outright lying to generate sales (Baldasty, 1992, 1999). Throughout this era, socialists, feminists, abolitionists, trade unionists, and radicals *writ large* tended to regard the mainstream commercial press as the mouthpiece of their enemies, and established their own media to advance their interests. Consider, for example, the United States in the early 1900s. Members and supporters of the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs published some 325 English and foreign language daily, weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines. Most of these were privately owned or were the publications of one of the 5000 Socialist Party locals. They reached a total of more than 2 million subscribers (Streitmatter, 2001). *Appeal to Reason*, the socialist newspaper based in Kansas, alone had a readership of nearly a million (Graham, 1990).

From the Gilded Age through the Progress-

ive Era, an institutional sea change transpired in US media not unlike the one taking place in the broader political economy. On the one hand, the dominant newspaper industry became increasingly concentrated into fewer chains and the majority of communities only had one or two dailies. The economics of advertising-supported newspapers erected barriers to entry that made it virtually impossible for small, independent newspapers to succeed, despite the protection of the constitution for a "free press." The dissident press, too, found media market economics treacherous, and lost much of its circulation and influence throughout the first third of the 20th century, far in excess of the decline in interest in "dissident" politics. (How much the collapse of the independent press contributed to the demise of popular politics is a matter of no small importance in media studies.)

At the beginning of the 20th century these developments led to a crisis for US journalism. It was one thing to posit that a commercial media system worked for democracy when there were numerous newspapers in a community, when barriers to entry were relatively low, and when immigrant and dissident media proliferated widely, as was the case for much of the 19th century. For newspapers to be partisan at that time was no big problem because there were alternative viewpoints present. It was quite another thing to make such a claim by the early 20th century when many communities only had one or two newspapers, usually owned by chains or very wealthy and powerful individuals. Everywhere concentration was on the rise, almost nowhere were new dailies being launched successfully to enter existing markets. For journalism to remain partisan in this context, for it to advocate the interests of the owners and the advertisers who subsidized it, would cast severe doubt on the credibility of the journalism. Likewise, sensationalism was less of a problem when there were several other newspapers in the community to counter it.

During the Progressive Era criticism of the capitalist press reached fever pitch in the United States, and was a major theme of muckrakers and progressive social critics, to an extent never equaled subsequently (Goldstein,

1989, p. ix). Leading reformers, like Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, argued that the commercial press was destroying democracy in its rabid service to the wealthy. As Henry Adams put it, "The press is the hired agent of a monied system, set up for no other reason than to tell lies where the interests are concerned." Criticism extended across the political spectrum; in the 1912 presidential race all three challengers to President Taft—Debs, Roosevelt, and Wilson—criticized the capitalist bias of the press. In 1919 Upton Sinclair published his opus, *The Brass Check*, which provided the first great systematic critique of the limitations of capitalist journalism for a democratic society. Sinclair's book was filled with example after example of explicit lying and distortion of the labor movement and socialist politics by the mainstream press. It is worth noting that he challenged those he criticized to find any error in his book, and he had no successful takers. The Associated Press even established a committee to evaluate the book so it could denounce Sinclair's charges; but the committee quietly abandoned the project without comment (Sinclair, 2003). In short, it was widely thought that journalism was explicit class propaganda in a war with only one side armed. The parallel critique of the press argued that greedy publishers encouraged a fraudulent sensationalistic journalism that played very loose with the truth to generate sales. In combination, the widespread acceptance of these beliefs was very dangerous for the business of newspaper publishing, as many potential readers would find newspapers incredible, propagandistic and unconvincing.

It was in the cauldron of controversy, during the Progressive Era, that the notion of professional journalism came of age. Savvy publishers understood that they needed to have their journalism appear neutral and unbiased, notions entirely foreign to the journalism of the republic's first century, or their businesses would be far less profitable. They would sacrifice their explicit political power to lock in their economic position. Publishers pushed for the establishment of formal "schools of journalism" to train a cadre of professional editors and reporters. None of these schools existed in 1900;

by 1920, all the major schools such as Columbia, Northwestern, Missouri, and Indiana were in full swing. The revolutionary and unprecedented notion of a separation of the editorial operations from the commercial affairs—termed the separation of church and state—became the professed model. The argument went that trained editors and reporters were granted autonomy by the owners to make the editorial decisions, and these decisions were based on their professional judgment, not the politics of the owners and the advertisers, or their commercial interests to maximize profit. As trained professionals, journalists would learn to sublimate their own values as well. Readers could trust what they read, and not worry about who owned the newspaper or that there was a monopoly or duopoly in their community.² Indeed, if everyone followed professional standards, press concentration would become a moot issue. Who needed more than one or two newspapers if every paper basically would end up running the same professionally driven content? Owners could sell their neutral monopoly newspapers to everyone in the community and rake in the profits.

It took decades for the professional system to be adopted by all the major journalistic media. And during the 1930s and 1940s prominent journalists like George Seldes and Haywood Broun struggled for a vision of professional journalism that was ruthlessly independent of corporate and commercial influence, a vision that collapsed with the smashing of popular politics following World War II. The first half of the 20th century is replete with owners like the *Chicago Tribune's* Colonel McCormick, who used their newspapers to advocate their fiercely partisan (and, almost always, far-right) views. When the Nazis came to power, for example, the *Tribune's* European correspondent defected to the Germans so he could do pro-Nazi short-wave radio broadcasts to the United States (Bergmeier and Lotz, 1997, pp. 70–3). But by mid-century even laggards like the *Tribune* had been brought into line. In the famed Tribune Building in Chicago, urban legend has it that editorial workers and the business side of the paper were instructed to use separate elevators, so the editorial integrity of the newspaper

would not be sullied. What is important to remember is that professional journalism looked awfully good compared to what it immediately replaced. The emphasis on non-partisanship and factual accuracy, the discrediting of sensationalism, who could oppose that? It has been and is roundly hailed as the solution to the problem of journalism.

Over time it has become clear that there was one problem with the theory of professional journalism, an insurmountable one at that. The claim that it was possible to provide neutral and objective news was suspect, if not entirely bogus. Decision-making is an inescapable part of the journalism process, and some values have to be promoted when deciding why one story rates front-page treatment while another is ignored.³ This does not mean that some journalism cannot be more nonpartisan or more accurate than others; it certainly does not mean that nonpartisan and accurate journalism should not have a prominent role to play in a democratic society. It only means that journalism cannot actually be neutral or objective, and unless one acknowledges that, it is impossible to detect the values at play that determine what becomes news, and what does not. The way journalism evolved in the United States was to incorporate certain key values into the professional code; there was nothing naturally objective or professional about those values. In core respects they responded to the commercial and political needs of the owners, although they were never framed in such a manner. To the extent journalists believe that by following professional codes they are neutral and fair—or, at least, they need not entertain the question of bias—they are incapable of recognizing and addressing this inherent limitation of the craft. Scholars have identified three deep-seated biases that are built into the professional code that journalists follow, and that have decidedly political and ideological implications.⁴ These biases remain in place to this day; indeed, they are stronger than ever.

First, to remove the controversy connected with the selection of stories, professional journalism regards anything done by official sources, e.g. government officials and prominent public figures, as the basis for legitimate

news. In the partisan era of journalism, newspapers would stand behind story selection as representing their values, what they thought was important. Such an attitude was anathema in professional times. Relying on sources as the basis for legitimate news helped solve that problem. Then, if chastised by readers for covering a particular story, an editor could say, "hey, don't blame us, the Governor (or any other official source) said it and we merely reported it." It also has the important added benefit of making the news fairly easy and inexpensive to cover; merely put reporters where official sources congregate and let them report what they say. This is a crucial factor in explaining why coverage of the US presidency has grown dramatically during the 20th century: there are reporters assigned to the White House and they file stories regularly, regardless of what is taking place. In the late 19th century, coverage of the president occupied maybe 2 or 3 percent of the "news hole" in US newspapers. By the middle to late 20th century, the president dominated 10–25 percent of the news, depending upon the scope of the survey.

The limitations of this reliance upon official sources are self-evident. It gives those in political office (and, to a lesser extent, business) considerable power to set the news agenda by what they speak about and, just as important, what they keep quiet about. When a journalist dares to raise an issue that no official source is talking about, he or she is accused of being unprofessional, and attempting to introduce his or her own biases into the news. Shrewd politicians and powerful figures learn how to use journalistic conventions to their advantage (Ponder, 1998). Journalists find themselves where they cannot antagonize their sources too much, or they might get cut off and become ineffectual. Political journalism has often degenerated to simply reporting what someone in one party says, and then getting a reply from someone on the other side of the aisle, or who takes a dissenting position within the community of official sources. All in all, the reliance on official sources gives the news a very conventional and mainstream feel, and does not necessarily lead to a rigorous examination of the major issues.

As the old saying goes, the media do not necessarily tell you what to think, but they tell you what to think about, and how to think about it. If one wants to know why a story is getting covered, and why it is getting covered the way it is, looking at sources will turn up an awfully good answer a high percentage of the time. It is not just about whether a story will be covered at all, but, rather, how much attention a story will get and the tone of the coverage. In view of the fact that legitimate sources tend to be restricted to political and economic elites, this bias sometimes makes journalists appear to be stenographers to those in power; i.e. exactly what one would expect in an authoritarian society with little or no formal press freedom.

Many working journalists would recoil at these statements. Their response would be that professional reliance on official sources is justifiable as "democratic" because the official sources are elected or accountable to people who are elected by the citizenry. This is not a dictatorship. The reporter's job is to report what people in power say and let the reader/viewer decide who is telling the truth. The problem with this rationale for stenography is that it forgets a critical assumption of free press theory: even leaders determined by election need a rigorous monitoring, the range of which cannot be determined solely by their elected opposition. Otherwise the citizenry has no way out of the *status quo*, no capacity to criticize the political culture as a whole. If such a watchdog function grows lax, corruption invariably grows, and the electoral system decays.

In addition to this reliance on official sources, experts are also crucial to explaining and debating policy, especially in complex stories. As with sources, experts are drawn almost entirely from the establishment. Studies on the use of news sources and experts invariably point to the strong mainstream bias built into the news. An analysis of national TV broadcast news for 2001, for example, found that the sources and experts used were overwhelmingly white, male, Republican, and wealthy. The emphasis upon Republicans can be explained mostly by the fact of a Republican administration. The news covers people in power. They also have

seemingly accepted business domination of the political economy as legitimate. There were 955 representatives of corporations on the newscasts as opposed to 31 representatives of labor (Howard, 2002).

A second flaw in journalism is that it tends to avoid contextualization like the plague. This was the great strength of partisan journalism: it attempted to take every important issue and place it in a larger political ideology, to make sense of it. But under professional standards, to provide meaningful context and background for stories, if done properly, will tend to commit the journalist (and medium) in the controversy professionalism is determined to avoid. Coverage tends to be a barrage of facts and official statements. What little contextualization professional journalism does provide tends to conform to official source consensus premises. The way to assure that news selection not be perceived as ideologically driven, is for there to be a news hook or a news peg to justify a news story. If something happens, it is news. This meant that crucial social issues like racism or environmental degradation fell through the cracks of journalism unless there is some event, like a demonstration or the release of an official report, to justify coverage, or unless official sources wanted to make it a story so they talk about it repeatedly. For those outside power to generate a news hook was and is often extraordinarily difficult. The 1968 report of the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders, for example, specifically cited the poor coverage and lack of contextualization by journalism of civil rights issues over the years as strongly contributing to climate that led to the riots of the 1960s (Commission on Civil Disorders, 1989, pp. 200–27).

Both of these factors helped to stimulate the birth and rapid rise of the public relations (PR) industry, the purpose of which was surreptitiously to take advantage of these two aspects of professional journalism. It is not an accident that the PR industry emerged on the heels of professional journalism. By providing slick press releases, paid-for “experts,” ostensibly neutral-sounding but bogus citizens groups, and canned news events, crafty PR agents have been able to shape the news to suit the interests

of their mostly corporate clientele. Powerful corporate interests that have a distinct concern about government regulation spend a fortune to see that their version of science gets a wide play in the news ... as objective truth (Ewen, 1996; Rampton and Stauber, 2001; Mundy, 2001). Media owners welcome PR, as it provides, in effect, a subsidy for them by providing them with filler at no cost. Surveys show that PR accounts for anywhere from 40 to 70 percent of what appears as news. Because PR is only successful if it is surreptitious, the identity of the major players and knowledge of their most successful campaigns is unknown to the general public. During the 1990s the PR industry underwent a major consolidation, and today the three largest advertising agency companies, which now offer full service corporate communication to their clients, own eight of the 10 largest US PR firms (Vranica, 2001, p. B7).

The combined effect of these two biases and the prominence of spin is to produce a grand yet distressing paradox: journalism, which, in theory, should inspire political involvement, tends to strip politics of meaning and promote a broad depoliticization. It is arguably better at generating ignorance and apathy than informed and passionately engaged citizens.⁵ Politics becomes antiseptic and drained of passion, of connection to the lives people lead. At its worst, it feeds a cynicism about the value and integrity of public life (Cappella and Hall Jamieson, 1997). So it is that on some of those stories that receive the most coverage, like the Middle East or the Clinton health care proposal in the early 1990s, Americans tend to be almost as ignorant as on those subjects that receive far less coverage (Fallows, 1996). The journalism is more likely to produce confusion than understanding and informed action. This creates a major dilemma for journalism over time. It is well understood that democracy needs journalism; viable self-government in our times is unthinkable without it. What is less well perceived is that journalism requires democracy. Unless there is a citizenry that depends upon journalism, that takes it seriously, that is politically engaged, journalism can lose its bearings and have far less incentive to do the hard work that

generates the best possible work. The political-system becomes less responsive and corruption grows. Thus we can restate the paradox of professional journalism as follows: journalism in any meaningful sense cannot survive without a viable democracy. This implies journalism must become aggressively and explicitly critical of the anti-democratic *status quo*, it must embrace once again the old adage of “afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted.” In short, the logic suggests that to remain democratic, to continue to exist, journalism must become ... unprofessional.

The third bias of professional journalism is more subtle but arguably the most important: far from being politically neutral, within the constraints of the first two biases, it smuggles in values conducive to the commercial aims of the owners and advertisers as well as the political aims of the owning class. Ben Bagdikian refers to this as the “dig here, not there” phenomenon (Bagdikian, 2000). So it is that crime stories and stories about royal families and celebrities become legitimate news. (These are inexpensive to cover and they never antagonize people in power.) So it is that the affairs of government are subjected to much closer scrutiny than the affairs of big business. And of government activities, those that serve the poor (e.g., welfare) get much more critical attention than those that serve primarily the interests of the wealthy (e.g., the CIA and other institutions of the national security state), which are more or less off-limits. This focus on government malfeasance and neglect of corporate misdeeds plays directly into the hands of those who wished to give more power and privileges to corporations, and undermine the ability of government to regulate in the public interest. As Ed Baker observes, professional practices, along with libel laws, “favor exposing governmental rather than private (corporate) wrongdoing” (Baker, 2002, p. 106). This, too, plays into the promotion of cynicism about public life. The corporate scandals of 2002 finally forced certain corporate excesses into the news, but what was immediately striking was how all the criminal activity had taken place for years without a shred of news media interest. The genius of professionalism in journalism is that

it tends to make journalists oblivious to the compromises with authority they routinely make.

Establishing if there actually *is* a pro-corporate bias in the news is not an easy task, and has been a source of more than a little controversy over the years. Although studies show the topic of corporate power is virtually unmentioned in US political journalism, it is highly controversial to accuse journalism of a pro-corporate bias (Farah and Elga, 2001, pp. 14–7). In the 1990s, for the first time, what amounts to a controlled experiment shed new light on the debate. Charles Lewis was an award-winning journalist who left network television to form the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) in the early 1990s. Receiving funding from foundations, Lewis assembled a large team of investigative journalists, and had them do several detailed investigative reports each year. The purpose was to release the reports to the news media and hope for coverage and follow-up investigative work. Lewis notes that when his group releases exposés of government malfeasance, they tend to receive extensive coverage and follow-up. The CPI broke the story, for example, about President Clinton’s “leasing” the Lincoln bedroom in the White House to major campaign contributors. When the CPI issues a report on corporate malfeasance, on the other hand, Lewis says the press conference is virtually empty and there is almost no coverage or follow-up. What makes this striking is that the exact same journalists do these reports.⁶ Were Lewis unprincipled, he would logically discontinue doing corporate exposés.⁷

Imagine if the President or the director of the FBI ordered news media not to issue any critical examinations of corporate power or class inequality in the United States. It would be considered a grotesque violation of democratic freedoms and a direct challenge to the viability of the republic. It would constitute a much greater threat to democracy than Watergate; one would probably have to return to the Civil War and slavery to find a comparable threat to the union. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) would go ballistic. Yet, when the private sector control of journalism, through professional practices, generates virtually the exact

same outcome, it goes unmentioned and unrecognized in the political culture. It is a non-issue.

Although the professional code incorporates these three general biases, it is also malleable; it is not fixed in stone. Over the years it has been influenced by factors such as the rise of radio and television, or new communication technologies.⁸ It is also true that the organized activities of the mass of people can have the ability to influence the shape of journalism. In moments of resurgence for social movements, professional journalism can improve the quantity and quality of coverage. Certainly there was a notable shift in coverage of issues surrounding African-Americans and women from the 1950s to the 1970s, reflecting the emergence of the civil rights and feminist movements. It works in the other direction, too. In the 1940s, for example, when the US labor movement was at its zenith, full-time labor editors and reporters abounded on US daily newspapers. There were several hundred of them. Even ferociously anti-labor newspapers, like the *Chicago Tribune*, covered the labor beat. The 1937 Flint sit-down strike that launched the United Auto Workers and the trade union movement was a major news story across the nation. By the 1980s, however, labor had fallen off the map and there were no more than a couple of dozen labor beat reporters remaining on US dailies. (The number is well below 10 and fast approaching zero today.) The story was simply no longer covered. Hence the 1989 Pittstown sit-down strike—the largest since Flint—was virtually unreported in the US media, and its lessons unknown. As the labor movement declined, coverage of labor was dropped. People still work, poverty among workers is growing, workplace conflicts are as important as ever, but this is no longer as newsworthy as it was when organized labor was more powerful (Meyerson, 2001).

The most important source of altering the professional code comes from the owners. Their constant drumbeat for profit, their concern with minimizing costs and enhancing revenues, invariably influences the manner in which news is collected and reported. We turn to this subject below.

Professional journalism hit its high water

mark in the United States from the 1950s into the 1970s. During this era, journalists had relative autonomy to pursue stories and considerable resources to use to pursue their craft. There was a strong emphasis upon factual accuracy, which is all to the good. The best journalism of the professional era came (and still comes) when there were debates among official sources or when an issue was irrelevant to elite concerns. In these cases, professional journalism could be sparkling. Likewise, during this golden age of professional journalism, the political culture, official sources, especially though not exclusively in the Democratic Party, were considerably more liberal than they would become by the 1980s. Along with the increase in social activism overall, this opened up opportunities for journalists to take risks and cover stories that would be much more difficult as the entire political class became increasingly enthralled with the market. So, for example, someone like Ralph Nader routinely received extensive and fairly sympathetic press coverage for his consumer campaigns during the 1960s and early 1970s. The consumer and environmental legislation he is responsible for pushing into law during this period is little short of astounding by contemporary standards. By the 1990s he had basically been scripted out of the political culture, and journalism, leading him to enter electoral politics to express his frustration with the *status quo*.

But one should not exaggerate the quality of journalism or the amount of autonomy journalists had from the interests of owners, even in this “golden age.” Even at the height of the “golden age” there was an underground press predicated upon the problems in contemporary journalism, and hard-edged criticism of the flaws of existing journalism abounded. In every community there was a virtual Sicilian Code of silence for the local commercial media, for example, regarding the treatment of the area’s wealthiest and most powerful individuals and corporations. Media owners wanted their friends and business pals to get nothing but kid gloves treatment in their media and so it was, except for the most egregious and boneheaded maneuver. Likewise, newspapers, even prestigious ones like the *Los Angeles Times*, used their

power to aid the economic projects of the newspaper's owners (Fine, 2001, p. S1). And pressure to shape editorial coverage to serve the needs of major advertisers was a recurring problem.

If the system of professional journalism has had deep-seated biases built into its code that have deadened it as a democratic force, that does not mean that there have not been many good, and some great, journalists who nevertheless have done brilliant work. Decade after decade newsrooms have produced outstanding journalists whose contributions to building a democratic and just society have been immeasurable.⁹ In recent times, one thinks, for example, of the work of the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Donald Bartlett and James Steele.¹⁰ Some of the most impressive work often has come in the form of books, ranging from those of Rachel Carson and Robert Caro to Studs Terkel and Betty Friedan. The list is really quite long. To some extent, this reflects the ability of books to convey detailed reports, but it also highlights how many great journalists had to leave the routine of standard newsroom journalism in order to do the stories they deemed important. Their work points out what can be done but generally is not being done. Along these lines, it is worth noting that many of the 20th century's finest journalists—e.g. Ben Bagdikian, George Seldes, A.J. Liebling, I.F. Stone, David Halberstam, Bill Moyers, and William Greider—have been among its foremost press critics. In short, the great work has been done not because of the system as much as in spite of it. As we discuss below, the degree of difficulty for committed journalists has only increased in the past two decades.

The Commercialization of Journalism

Professional journalism emerged not to the opposition of most media owners, but to the contrary, with their active sponsorship. There was a struggle between owners and progressive journalists to determine the contours of professional journalism in its first generation or two, but by mid-century it had settled for the most part into its current form. It made sense

for media owners to grant some autonomy to journalists because it gave their product more credibility and worked to enhance their commercial prospects. The autonomy it granted journalists was always relative and, as we discussed, the manner in which the professional code evolved put significant limitations on the capacity of professional journalism to serve as a democratic force. Moreover, the professional journalism "deal" was never made in a formal contract, and newswriters unions never were powerful enough to wrestle control over journalism (and budgets) from media owners in their contract negotiations. By the 1980s the "deal" made less and less sense for media owners. Relaxation of media ownership regulations along with general market pressures led to wave after wave of media dealmaking, with the largest firms that owned news media much larger relative to the balance of the corporate community than their predecessors had been. These firms, often media conglomerates, that paid vast sums to purchase news media wanted and needed to generate significant returns to pay down debt and satisfy investors; to these firms the idea that they should provide some degree of autonomy to their news divisions became increasingly nonsensical, except for their public relations pronouncements. After all, the workers in the other properties of their media empires were not granted such autonomy; they were expected to deliver directly and immediately to the firm's bottom line success.

In this context, journalism, too, increasingly became subjected to an explicit commercial regimentation; the protection from commercial pressure provided by professionalism was undermined. While this is the primary factor and the overarching factor to explain recent developments in journalism, it is not the sole factor. The rise of new commercial news media enabled by new technologies—in particular round-the-clock TV news channels and the Internet—have increased the need for on-going attention-getting stories, with less emphasis on their significance of the story by traditional standards (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999). Libel court rulings and government secrecy laws and regulations have made it much more difficult and cost prohibitive to do investigative work

on corporations and government affairs. One of the ironies of neoliberalism—as manifested in the Bush–Cheney variant—is that its contempt for government (and much professed love of the wisdom of private citizens) does not extend therefore to encouraging the citizenry to have much of a clue of what the government is doing in its name.¹¹ Likewise, as journalism becomes more explicitly directed by market concerns, the overall depoliticization of society will hardly encourage the development of political coverage. And finally, as I discuss in the next section, the conservative campaign against the “liberal media” has produced a chilling effect on journalism’s willingness to ask tough questions of many of those in power. In combination, over the past two decades this has led to a sustained attack on the professional ideal, a sea change in journalism, and a crisis in the field greater than any other period with the possible exception of the late Gilded Age and the Progressive Era.

The commercial attack on the professional autonomy of journalism has been widely chronicled and assumes many forms.¹² I highlight the main trends, and some of the more striking implications for democracy. For starters, the trend has been toward a cutback in the resources allocated to journalism. By the 1990s, if not earlier, commercial news media were “forced to embrace the financial discipline required by parent companies that no longer looked at news as a golden child and free-spending spirit even when it refused to be bound by life’s practicalities” (Greppi, 2001, p. 3).¹³ A 2002 Project for Excellence in Journalism survey of US journalists found them “a grumpy lot,” due largely to budget cuts, lower salaries, no raises, and job insecurity (Trigoboff, 2002c, p. 12). There was a virtual news room uprising at the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2002, for example, when parent company Dow Jones announced sweeping cuts in the number of senior journalists, while the firm’s executive ranks were untouched (Tharp, 2002). The media firms argue that such cutbacks are necessary to remain competitive, but many journalists claim that giant firms use their market power to strip down resources for news to make a short-term profit grab. In 2001 the publisher of the *San Jose*

Mercury-News, Jay Harris, resigned his position to protest at what he regarded as the entirely unnecessary editorial cutbacks at his paper mandated by parent company Knight-Ridder. As Harris put it, his newspaper, like most others, was raking in enormous profits. The cutbacks were unjustifiable (Barringer, 2001, p. A10; Laventhol, 2001, pp. 18–22).

Lowballing editorial budgets has proven extremely profitable, at least in the short term. The great commercial success story of US journalism has been the Fox News Channel, which has cut costs to the bone by basically replacing more expensive conventional journalism with celebrity pontificators (Walley, 2002, pp. 1, 22). Using this formula, Fox News was able to generate roughly equivalent profits to CNN by 1999–2000, while spending far less than CNN do so.¹⁴ The operating profit at News Corporation’s US cable channels, which includes the Fox News Network, more than tripled from the third quarter of 2001 to the third quarter of 2002 (*The Economist*, 2002c, p. 60). The rise of media conglomerates has made it far easier for firms to spread their editorial budgets across several different media, so that a key trend has been to have the same journalist report for a media firm’s newspaper, website, TV station, and radio station, or some combination of the above (Goldsmith and McClintock, 2001, pp. 1, 58). The Internet only accelerates this process. This provides much of the incentive for firms to become large conglomerates, as it gives them tremendous cost savings compared to those firms that do not have a similar arsenal of media properties (Campbell, M., 2002). Indeed, even separate firms are partnering (especially where regulations prohibit them from merging) to spread the editorial budgets across several media (Hoag, 2002). When ABC News and CNN were negotiating a merger in 2002, one observer deemed it “an unholy alliance that could only make sense to cost-cutters” (Trigoboff and McClellan, 2002, p. 1). One Wall Street analyst thought the merger would lead to cost savings (including labor costs) of \$100 million to \$200 million (Lowry, T., 2002). As Av Westin, the six-time Emmy award-winning CBS journalist put it in 2001: “To expect that any corporate manager will re-invest savings in bet-

ter news programming is, I fear, a delusion" (Westin, 2001, p. 35).

The effects of this budget-cutting mania on journalism arguably have been entirely negative. It has meant a relaxation or alteration, sometimes severe, of professional news standards. Professional standards have not collapsed entirely. There remains a ruthless requirement that journalists not invent sources or consciously lie in their journalism. And journalists exposed for blatantly violating these norms will usually be fired and have to move on to new professions (Barringer, 2002b; *New York Times*, 2002, p. A26). But the nature of what gets covered and how it gets covered, the meat and potatoes of journalism, have changed, all for the worse. Factual accuracy and honesty are all well and good; but it is not the be all and end all of journalism if the story in question concerns a celebrity's trial or a donkey getting a shampoo. The broader question is how the decline in resources and the pressure to generate profits pushes factually accurate journalism to concentrate upon some stories over others. To paraphrase Trudy Lieberman, you can't report what you don't pursue (Lieberman, 2000).

And it is here that the attack on professional standards is striking. Fewer reporters means it is easier for public relations executives to get their client's messages into the news unadulterated by journalism. As two executives for Edelman Public Relations exulted in 2000, as a result of media consolidation and conglomeration, there are fewer reporters and resources, and, therefore, "an increased likelihood that press releases will be used word-for-word, in part if not in whole" (Reeds and Colbourne, 2000, p. 25). International coverage has been a victim of corporate cost cuts. Likewise, investigative journalism—i.e. original research into public issues, not merely reporting on what people in power are talking about, once considered the hallmark of feisty "Fourth Estate" journalism in a free society—is now on the endangered species list. It costs far more to do hard investigations than it does to do official source stenography, and requires skilled experienced journalists. It is much more lucrative to have less experienced journalists fill the

news hole with the proclamations and debates of those in power and stories that are easier to cover. Investigative journalism is also suspect in the new world order because the media firm has little incentive to produce a journalism that might enmesh it in conflict with some powerful business or governmental institutions. A five-year study of investigative journalism on TV news completed in 2002 determined that investigative journalism has all but disappeared on the nation's commercial airwaves. Much of what was passed off as original investigative work—put at 1 percent of TV news programming—included stories such as "women illegally injecting silicone at parties" (Just et al., 2002, p. 103). As Charles Lewis points out, a good portion of what appears as investigative work on network TV news is actually the reporting of leaks or government reports where reporters are spoonfed by sources.¹⁵ And even then, as Greg Palast observes, the reporter often just presents it as someone else making the charge, no actual journalistic inquiry into the truth of the matter takes place (Schaeffer, 2002, p. 8).

The combination of increasing need to rely upon public relations and a declining commitment to investigative journalism plays directly into the hands of powerful commercial interests, especially in environmental and public health stories where scientific expertise is necessary to explain public issues. (That is, of course, if the stories are even covered.) It is here, as Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber demonstrate, that corporations have been able to generously provide the media with their self-interested version of science and undermine public understanding of the issues (Rampton and Stauber, 2001).

Indeed, in the current environment, it is decreasingly the case that the reporter will bother to investigate to find out who is telling the truth if there is a factual dispute among official sources. The professional reliance upon official sources as the basis for news—always a problem—has been reduced to the absurd. To investigate factual disputes among official sources would take time and cast the pall of bias over the journalist, depending upon whom the findings favored. When, for example, in

2002 Democrats criticized Halliburton for not paying taxes under Dick Cheney's leadership, the press ran the charges and a response from Halliburton denying the charges. No journalist, in the professional mainstream press at least, appeared to attempt to investigate to determine who was telling the truth (Bumiller, 2002, p. C5). This environment becomes a scoundrel's paradise, as one can lie with virtual impunity; it becomes the function of one's opponents, not journalists, to establish the truth, and one's opponents can always be dismissed as partisan. It also means that journalists are far more comfortable putting political debate in terms of strategies and spin, rather than digging and locating the actual facts in the matter and letting the chips fall where they may. So it was that much of the press coverage of the political response to the corporate scandals of 2002—to which I return below—dwelled upon how the parties hoped to spin the issue to their advantage.¹⁶ (Need it be pointed out, that this obsession with how politicians spin—to the point that journalists sometimes chastise politicians who fail to spin them effectively—rather than with getting at the truth, breeds a certain contempt for public life.¹⁷) Av Westin chronicled the deterioration of professional journalism practices in detail in his Freedom Forum handbook for TV journalists, and their implications:

As a result, the audience has become accustomed to shoddy reporting to the point that the average viewer does not necessarily expect quality journalism and probably could not discern the difference between a well produced story and a below-average one. The sad truth is that because the mass audience cannot perceive the difference, management is reluctant to spend more money to improve the product. (Westin, 2000, p. 5)

Another area where professional standards have relaxed is with regard to commercialism. Journalists have long faced pressure to shape stories to suit advertisers and owners, and much of the professional code has attempted to prevent this, or at least to minimize this. But corporate management increasingly grinds away at their news divisions to play ball with the commercial needs of the parent firms. Over time it has been successful, and those who

survive in the new world order of corporate journalism tend to internalize the necessary values. One survey conducted by the trade publication *Electronic Media* in 2001 found that the vast majority of TV station executives found their news departments "cooperative" in shaping the news to assist in "nontraditional revenue development," in which the news department cooperates with major advertisers to co-promote events and uses advertisers as experts in stories (Chunovic, 2002, p. 6). The Pew Research Center survey of 300 journalists released in 2000 found that nearly one-half of journalists acknowledged sometimes consciously engaging in self-censorship to serve the commercial interests of their firm or advertisers, and only one-quarter of them stated this never happened to their knowledge (Pew Research Center, 2000).

This commercial penetration of professional journalism assumes two direct forms. First, commercial interests directly penetrate the news, corrupting its integrity. This process has been well chronicled.¹⁸ To some extent it entails savvy corporate marketers, who produce slick video features to be played on TV newscasts as news stories, but also include a plug for the firm's product (White, 2001, pp. B1, B6). It also includes when the traditional "news hole" increasingly permits commercial messages, such as selling obituaries, running advertisements on the front page, or putting commercial overlays over editorial content, be it in print or broadcast (Barringer, 2002a, p. C7; Orwall, 2001, p. B8; *Wall Street Journal*, 2000, p. B4; www.accessatlanta.com, 2001). More ominously, the practice of permitting advertisers to influence the news and how it is covered has become more common. This has been especially true in areas of health care and medicine, where the commercial corruption of reporting has become, pun intended, epidemic (Feder, 2002; Raeburn, 2000, pp. 66, 68; Wang, 2000, pp. 3, 44; Zuckerman, 2002). In 2002 an editor of the *New York Post* went so far as to inform publicists that a good way to get coverage in her paper was for someone to buy an advertisement (*O'Dwyer's PR Daily*, 2002).

Along these lines, the traditional professional prohibition against journalists accepting bribes

to write stories in a particular manner is under attack. In an increasingly commercialized journalism "market," where profit maximization is the firm's explicit defining objective, journalists figure they might as well get their's too. So it has developed that journalists have become "pitchmen" for products (Jurkowitz, 2000, p. F6). PBS and CBS correspondent Charlie Rose, for example, was master of ceremonies for Coca-Cola's annual shareholders meeting in 2002 (Grove, 2002, p. C3). This is strongly encouraged by the tendency to market newscasters as "celebrities" and "brands" as a relatively inexpensive way for media firms to increase ratings, sales, and profits from their news assets (Beatty, 2002; Bernstein, 2000b, p. 60; Campbell, K., 2002a). In 2002, for but one small example, a New York TV weatherman agreed to go out on televised dates, which would be critiqued on air by his colleagues the next day (Huff, 2002a). Accordingly, the prohibition against journalists accepting direct commercial bribes remains, but it is less impressive with all the indirect commercial influences taking place. And the downside of being more explicitly commercial in journalistic practices is not as ominous as it once was. When an ABC medical journalist was suspended for a week for endorsing Tylenol in a radio commercial in 2002, she left ABC to accept a lucrative position at Johnson and Johnson, Tylenol's parent company (Huff, 2002b). In another case, a Baltimore health reporter who had been fired by a Baltimore TV station because of her "blundering efforts to make money from the medical institutions she had been covering," was able to parlay her ties into a weekly TV health news program that was described by one Baltimore journalist as "an alarming parade of commercial tie-ins" (Folkenflik, 2002). Like the professional commitment to factual accuracy, the professional prohibition against explicit commercial bribery remains standing, but appears increasingly to be beside the point.

The second form that commercial penetration of journalism assumes is also a traditional problem for commercial journalism that professionalism was meant to eliminate: journalists using their privileges to report favorably on their

owner's commercial ventures or investments. In an era where journalism is increasingly produced by large media conglomerates with vast non-journalistic holdings, and where the barrier between editorial and commercial is withering, the problem has returned to the fore with a vengeance. The major TV networks have used their news programs to promote their other media fare in news stories, such as when ABC News promoted Disney's 2001 film *Pearl Harbor* or played up the fictitious town of Push, Nevada, which was the name of a short-lived primetime series.¹⁹ ABC News also seemingly killed stories that cast negative light on parent company Disney's other holdings, including a report on paedophiles being employed at a Disney theme park (Helmre, 2000, p. 7). *NBC News* featured more than twice the amount of news coverage of the 2002 Winter Olympics than did *ABC World News Tonight*, and nearly seven times more coverage than *CBS Evening News*. Is it any surprise that NBC paid for the rights to broadcasting the Winter Olympics? (Solomon, 2003). CBS was not to be outdone. In 2000 its news programming did frequent "reports" on its "reality" program, *Survivor*, and it lent a journalist to do a weekly interview program to discuss developments on another "reality" show, *Big Brother* (Carter, 2000, pp. C1, C11). In 2001 AOL Time Warner's CNN Headline News channel acknowledged that it was plugging other AOL Time Warner products and channels in its news headlines; the practice was in fact a logical outcome of the corporate commitment to "synergy" (Jensen, 2001). "The drive to achieve synergy," journalist Ken Auletta stated in 2002, "is often journalism's poison" (www.iwantmedia.com, 2002).

The corporate/commercial pressure on news often takes place indirectly, and is therefore less likely to be recognized as such by journalists or the public. The flip side of the reluctance to spend money on investigative or international coverage, and the reluctance to antagonize powerful sources, is an increased emphasis on largely trivial stories, that give the appearance of controversy and conflict but rarely have anything to do with any significant public issue. Study after study reveals a general decline in the amount of "hard news" relative to fluff.²⁰

Some argued that in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, US news media had seen the light and returned to their "historic mission," but such fantasies were short-lived (Trigoboff, 2002b, p. 18). A central preoccupation of the news has become the activities of celebrities, especially with regard to their personal lives (Shales, 2002b, p. 23). So it was that during 2001 and 2002 the news was dominated with stories about Winona Ryder's shoplifting trial, Robert Blake's murder arrest, and Gary Condit's affairs (Moraes, 2002a, p. C7). A politician stands a far greater chance to become the object of news media scrutiny if she or he is rumored to have not paid 10 parking tickets or if they failed to pay a bar bill than if they used their power to quietly funnel billions of public dollars to powerful special interests. The justification for this caliber of journalism is that these stories are popular and therefore profitable, and commercial news needs to "give the people what they want," but to a certain extent, leaving aside the question of whether journalism should be determined by marketing polls, this is circular logic (Greppi, 2002, p. 2). The motor force behind this journalism is as much supply as demand. It is cheaper and easier to cover than "hard" news, and never enmeshes the media firm in a controversy with anyone in power, while providing an illusion of controversy to the public. Over time whatever taste the public has for this type of fare is only encouraged through extensive exposure. Had a similar commitment to the more expensive and risky exposés of government and corporate corruption been made, one suspects a public taste might have been developed for those stories as well. But that is not an option the people are given.

Celebrities and trivial personal indiscretion are not all that commercial journalism favors. Likewise, stories that emphasize violence meet the commercial criteria as well. The news, especially television news, is awash in stories about traffic and airplane accidents, fires and murders (Wang, 2001, p. 16). The Washington serial sniper story of October 2002 was a textbook example of this phenomenon. It generated high ratings and took no great skill or expense to cover. It received round-the-clock coverage,

yet the news media had little to report, so much of the "news" was idle speculation, bland repetition, or hashing over rumors. As Ted Koppel put it, the media were "going nuts" over what he termed a "dreadful but relatively minor threat" in the bigger scheme of things (Lowry, B., 2002). It was, by and large, a waste of time, but a commercially lucrative waste of time.

Another crucial way in which the commercialization of journalism covertly alters the news is by constantly pushing journalism to be directed to the lucrative markets desired by media owners and big ticket advertisers. Given the constant pressure for profit, this concern with generating news content that will attract the most lucrative target audience has grown to an obsession.²¹ The days when journalism was a public service directed at the entire population—obviously never entirely accurate—are long gone. Today much of journalism is increasingly directed at the middle class and the upper class while the working class and the poor have been written off altogether (Callahan and Helliker, 2001, p. A8). Coverage of labor issues has plummeted, for example, in the past generation and barely exists any longer in the news media.²² Part of any explanation for the relatively nonexistent and distorted treatment of African-Americans and Latinos in the news owes to their not being especially attractive economically to advertisers (Johnson, 2002b, p. 3D). Ben Bagdikian captured this class bias well in a 2001 essay:

If the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped steadily for twenty years it would be front page and leading broadcast news day after day until the government took action. That 32 million of our population have their housing, food, and clothing "index" drop steadily for more than 30 years is worth only an occasional feature story about an individual or statistical fragments in the back pages of our most influential news organizations. (Bagdikian, 2001)

Along these lines, a survey released by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in 2003 showed that most Americans had no idea that nearly 33 million of their compatriots lived in fairly dire poverty; most of them thought the total was between one and five million (U.S. Newswire, 2003).

The flip side to the marginalization of the poor and working class from the news, has been the elevation of business to center stage. If labor reporting went from being a standard position on nearly all major news media two or three generations ago to being extinct by 2003, business reporting skyrocketed, to the point where business news and general news seemingly converged. Although the majority of Americans have little direct interest in the stock market—and it is far from the most pressing immediate economic issue in their lives—the operating assumption in the news media became that all Americans are active stock traders with a passionate concern about equity and bond markets. Schools of journalism have responded to this development, and chairs in business journalism have mushroomed across college campuses. “Business journalism is hot,” a Columbia University J-School official noted. “Journalists see it as a career track” (Oleck, 2001, p. 16).

Regrettably, however, the turn to business journalism has not meant that the affairs of corporations and investors have been subjected to hard, critical scrutiny in terms of how they affect public life. It has not even meant necessarily that there has been increased scrutiny of business behavior to protect investors and consumers (www.essentialaction.org, 2000). To the contrary, business journalism is, as one observer put it, “teeming with reverence for the accumulation of wealth” (Solomon, 2001). To some extent this is due to the rah-rah capitalism ethos that marinates the corporate media as much as corporate America, but it is also due to the pressures highlighted above: reliance upon business sources and marginalizing critical sources, use of corporate PR as the basis for news, and fear of antagonizing corporate advertisers (Fost, 2002a, 2002b). The corruption of business reporting was such, with puff pieces extolling the virtues of this company or that, that in 2002 the New York Stock Exchange was pressing for regulations that would require journalists to disclose the financial interests of the stock market analysts they used in their news stories (Boland, 2002, p. 1). By 2002 mainstream media critics concurred that business journalism, rather than monitoring the excesses

of the business expansion of the 1990s, actually played a strong part in magnifying them and “inflating the bubble” (Kurtz, 2002b, p. A1; Longman, 2002). As one journalist put it, “the bubble was filled with hot air from hyperventilating journalists” (Solomon, 2002). Yet few journalists ever questioned the turn away from labor and toward business. It was incorporated into the professional code and most journalists internalized it as proper and beyond reproach. Even today after the massive corporate scandals of 2001–2, the central role of business news and the virtual absence of news concerning the working class and poor is taken for granted by professional journalists. It is not seen as “self-censorship” to shape the news in such a manner. That is the genius of professionalism as a form of regulation.

It is with regard to the corporate scandals of 2001 and 2002 that all of these core problems for contemporary journalism come together: lowball budgets, deification of official sources, lack of investigative work, enhanced attention to the editorial concerns of advertisers, emphasis on the trivial, the glorification of business and the exile of the poor and working class. The results were one of the darkest and most depressing episodes in the recent history of US journalism, and its nearly thorough abrogation of its role as a watchdog over power, as a feisty Fourth Estate. The news coverage played a large, perhaps even decisive, role in the collapse of anything remotely close to a democratic resolution to this crisis.

The crisis emerged when Enron filed for bankruptcy in 2001, followed by WorldCom’s \$107 billion free fall and bankruptcy in 2002 (Romero and Atlas, 2002, pp. A1, A12). Arthur Andersen, Global Crossing and a host of other firms followed in the wake (Greider, 2002, pp. 18–22). What was striking about these historically unprecedented corporate collapses was not simply that they were fraught with fraud and corruption, with workers, taxpayers and investors bilked out of billions and billions of dollars. After all, that might be considered capitalism as usual, if you can get away with it, and many did and do. What was most striking about these scandals, as two journalists put it, was that “the fraud occurred in the most heav-

ily regulated and monitored area of corporate activity" (Weissman and Mokhiber, 2002). Enron was described by Charles Lewis, the journalist responsible for much of the investigation into its activities, as "a company inordinately dependent on government favors" (Herbert, 2002). Much of the fraud perpetrated by Enron, WorldCom, Global Crossing and the others was the result of their being able to have politicians push through highly dubious "deregulation" schemes which opened the door to billion dollar ripoffs that would have been impossible otherwise (Chaffin, 2002, p. 20; Wheat, 2002, pp. 34–42). Along these lines, firms like Enron and Arthur Andersen were among the largest political contributors to political candidates in the nation; although the majority of money went to Republicans, Democrats had a solid place at the trough (Bliven, 2002; Lewis, C., 2002, p. A9; *Multinational Monitor*, 2002a, p. 44). Global Crossing "tossed more money around town than Enron," observed *Business Week*, and, if anything, it spread its largesse more toward Democrats than Republicans as it sought government support for its activities (Borrus, 2002, p. 49). In short, this was not a business scandal, this was a political scandal of the highest magnitude. It went directly at the issue of corruption in governance and the broader political economy that is built into the system and that takes place across the government, most notably at its very highest levels.

In this context, let us consider the nature of the news coverage of the corporate scandals. Most striking, despite the vast resources devoted to business journalism in the 1990s, the media missed the developing story *in toto*. It failed in its role as an early alarm system for social problems (Schell, 2002). It is worth noting that by the mid-1990s the alternative press was beginning to report on evidence of Enron's chicanery, and Ralph Nader and his cohort were aggressively pointing to the highly dubious nature of Enron's and WorldCom's activities, among others, but this was resolutely ignored by the mainstream (*CounterPunch*, 2002, pp. 1, 2). Indeed, as the *New York Times* later conceded, when WorldCom chief executive officer (CEO) Bernard Ebbers spoke to the

National Press Club in 2000, as the Ponzi Scheme WorldCom had been using to grow was unraveling, the assembled journalists gave him a loud round of applause and the mood was "celebratory."²³ Enron was named by *Fortune* magazine as "America's Most Innovative Company" every single year from 1995 to 2000 (Schiller, 2002). A data search of mainstream news (and business news) coverage for the word "Enron" prior to 2001 finds "little but praise for its market innovations" (Ledbetter, 2003, p. A29). It subsequently became known that these firms had courted the media with the same vigilance and skill they courted politicians. Both the *New York Times* and Viacom had major business ventures with Enron, for example, and Enron paid several prominent journalists amounts ranging from \$50,000 to \$100,000 to "consult" for them (Blow, 2002; Kurtz, 2002a, p. C1; Smith, 2000, p. A3). Enron played all the angles; it was an original underwriter for a major PBS six-part series on globalization that eventually aired in 2002, with Enron's name removed from the list of funders (FAIR Media Advisory, 2002).

The financial collapse of these firms by 2001 and 2002, along with the transparent use of fraudulent and illegal techniques to bilk people out of billions finally made this a news story, a very big news story. Moreover, there were grounds to think this would be a political scandal of the highest magnitude, arguably on a par with or exceeding Watergate. For starters, President George W. Bush, Vice President Cheney, as well as their administration had extremely close relations with Enron and its executives. Enron CEO Kenneth Lay and his fellow Enron executives had also been major contributors to George W. Bush's political career (Dunbar et al., 2002, pp. 1, 2, 6; Herbert, 2002, p. A27). At a 1997 party for then Enron CEO Rich Kinder, at which Enron executives joked about using bogus accounting tricks to make "a kazillion dollars" and attended by then Texas Governor George W. Bush, former president George H. W. Bush told Kinder: "You have been fantastic to the Bush family. I don't think anybody did more than you did to support [my son] George."²⁴ The payoff for Enron of having George W. Bush enter the White

House was immediate: its executives played a prominent role in helping Vice President Cheney develop an energy policy in 2001, and the Bush administration helped reduce Enron's culpability (and that of many other corporations) for the California energy scandal in the newly deregulated market in 2001 (Leopold, 2002).

One would have imagined the Democrats would have had a field day with this issue. After all, the comparatively trivial Whitewater scandal generated a special prosecutor who had more than five years and a large staff and budget to have open season on any aspect of President Clinton's conduct, though no crimes concerning Whitewater were ever established. And had the Democrats gone to war on his issue, journalists would have had ample "official source" input to warrant massive coverage of the corporate scandals as a political crisis of the highest magnitude. But Democrats did not pursue this route, for any number of reasons, but one in particular stands out: The Democrats, too, were culpable. They, too, had presided over the deregulation fiascos and they too had corporate blood money filling their campaign coffers.²⁵ If this story was pursued, there was no telling where it would stop. Consequently, the Democrats, led by long-time deregulation proponent Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, shared the Republicans' desire to downplay the political aspects of the crisis and convert it into a business scandal, where a few rogue CEOs stepped out of line and needed the long arm of the law to corral them so investors could sleep in peace again (Oppel, Jr., 2003, pp. C1, C10). Accordingly, with no official sources pushing this as a political scandal, journalists easily converted it into a business story. Some of the reporting in the business and trade press was first rate, but the crucial link between corporate crime and political corruption all but disappeared. Accordingly, too, the story then became decidedly less important and was relegated to the business pages, to be replaced by whatever the official sources wished to talk about, like the prospective war on Iraq. This inability to provide criticism of the system as a whole—even when it is well deserved—is an inherent flaw of professional journalism.

But the petering out of the press coverage of the corporate scandals of 2001 and 2002 went beyond the traditional limitations of professional journalism. It also reflected the core problem of entrusting the news to large, profit-motivated and self-interested business organizations. The CEO of the New York Times Company put it well in 2002:

Historically, the press's ability to act as a check on the actions of government has been helped by the fact that the two institutions are constitutionally separated, organizationally and financially. The press does not depend on government officials either for its standing or its resources.

But it has a much more intricate relationship with big business. Today's news media are themselves frequently a part of large, often global corporations dependent on advertising revenue that, increasingly, comes from other large corporations. As public companies themselves, the news media are under the same kind of pressure to create "shareholder value," by reducing costs and increasing earnings, as are other public companies. And they face numerous conflicts of interest as they grow larger and more diversified. (Lewis, R., 2002, p. A23)

In short, the corporate news media have a vested interest in the corporate system. The largest media firms are members in good standing in the corporate community and closely linked through business relations, shared investors, interlocking directors, and shared political values with each other. This pushes the corporate news media, as Tom Shales puts it, to "paint as rosy a picture of the economy as possible" (Shales, 2002a, p. 33). This encouraged the press coverage of the corporate political scandals of 2001 and 2002 to revert to a "crisis management mode," where the structural and institutional determinants of the corruption are unexamined and unexposed (Reed, 2002, p. 31). By golly, the system works.

There is yet one further layer to this story that is necessary for a full understanding of the news coverage of the corporate scandals of 2001 and 2002, and that concerns the conduct of the media corporations themselves. These firms are hardly innocent bystanders perched on the moral high ground as they report upon the Enrons and Global Crossings of the world. Their CEOs, like the executives at Enron, have seen

their salaries shoot off the charts while earnings stagnate and layoffs abound (Goldsmith, 2001, pp. 1, 48; Krugman, 2002b, p. A17). Their CEOs, too, made killings selling off vastly overpriced stock when they knew their firm was a clunker but the media were still reporting on it as if it was an up and comer (Gimein, 2002, pp. 64–74; Larsen et al., 2002b, p. 1; Mermigas, 2002, p. 20). Media firms, too, à la WorldCom and Enron, traditionally employed questionable accounting practices that inflated profit expectations and fleeced workers (Byrnes and Lowry, 2002, p. 56; Conniff, 2002). Moreover, a stunning number of major media corporations and executives were under investigation for criminal activities by 2002, including Disney CEO Michael Eisner, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, Charter Communications, and Vivendi Universal (*Economist*, 2002a, pp. 55–57; Hofmeister, 2002; Johnson and Larsen, 2003, p. 20; Mallet and Larsen, 2002, p. 1; Reuters dispatch, 2002; Streitfeld, 2002; *Wall Street Journal Online*, 2002). In keeping with the notion that the closer an industry is to being explicitly regulated, the higher the likelihood of extreme corruption, media firms are a natural hotspot for flimflam. In 2002 five former executives at the bankrupt Adelphia Communications (a regulated cable TV company) were arrested and charged with “orchestrating one of the largest frauds to take place at a US public company” (Larsen et al., 2002a, p. 1). The media company on the top of the corporate crime blotter was none other than AOL Time Warner, which faced a series of lawsuits and criminal investigations from the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Department of Justice. It was charged with heavily distorting its books, including inflating its advertising revenues one time by nearly \$200 million (Angwin and Peers, 2002; *Economist*, 2002b, pp. 57–8; Grimes, 2002, p. 1; Kirkpatrick, 2002, pp. B1, B14; Kirkpatrick and Hansell, 2002, pp. C1, C2; Larsen, 2002, p. 19; Peers and Cohen, 2002). Some of AOL Time Warner's dubious deals that were under investigation by the SEC included complex transactions with the discredited Qwest Communications and WorldCom (Kirkpatrick and Romero, 2002, pp. C1, C4). Media firms historically have been reluctant to cover their own

misdeeds in their news media, and they could hardly be enthusiastic about a no-holds-barred journalism that would get to the bottom of the corporate crime issue and let the chips fall where they may (Maguire, 2002).

In combination, then, the press coverage of the corporate crime scandal of 2001 and 2002 helped it go from being a potential hurricane to a mild evening rain shower. “Looking back on 2002,” a public interest group observed, “it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the big corporations won. Confronted with a crisis of epic proportions, they emerged with bloodied noses and sullied reputations, but little more” (*Multinational Monitor*, 2002b, p. 5). In the summer of 2002, when the crisis was at its peak, both Bush and Cheney gave speeches railing against corporate misconduct, while at the same time aggressively fundraising corporations and wealthy individuals for campaign contributions (Nieves and Bumiller, 2002, p. A19). But even before then, in the spring, the business press acknowledged the storm had passed, and corporate reform would be, at most, modest (Dunham et al., 2002, pp. 30–2; Kuttner, 2002b, p. 24). It was left to syndicated columnist Molly Ivins to put the matter in perspective. In a column outlining the chummy connection between the relevant members of Congress responsible for overseeing the investigation of corporate fraud with the very industries most likely to have engaged in crime, Ivins concluded: “They've already called off the reform effort; it's over. Corporate muscle showed up and shut it down ... Bottom line: It's all going to happen again. We learned zip from our entire financial collapse. Our political system is too bought-off to respond intelligently” (Ivins, 2002). The economist Mark Weisbrot captured the irony of the situation: “Our Congress and the executive branch have become so corrupted by our system of legalized bribery—political campaign contributions—that they cannot even enact positive reforms that are desired by most of the business class” (Weisbrot, 2003).

So far I have discussed the direct and indirect commercial pressures upon journalism and their almost entirely negative impact. There is also a broader political economic pressure, one that is magnified by the increasingly explicit

commandment to market news to target audiences. In a largely depoliticized society, there may be little effective demand for political journalism. Depoliticization is built into the broader political culture of the United States, and it has grown arguably over the decades; the media tend to encourage the process but they are not primarily responsible for it. As I mentioned above, it is often noted that democracy requires journalism; what is less frequently emphasized is that journalism requires democracy. Unless there is strong political culture there will be little demand for excellent journalism. And if, as will tend to accompany a depoliticized society, the political system is corrupt and removed from popular influence, journalists have less incentive to produce hard-hitting exposés, because they know nothing tangible in the form of political reform will result. So what has emerged in the United States is that a significant number of outstanding investigative reports are done, but there is far less follow-up by other journalists to push the story along, especially if no one in power is excited by the story. The stories fall like stones to the bottom on the ocean; there is no echo effect.

This dilemma leads to a fork in the road for the corporations that direct the US news media. Do they attempt to battle the tide, provide hard-hitting and powerful political journalism even if it costs more and may not have a great deal of immediate market demand, in the hope of generating a strong market for the news down the road? (Loven, 2002). This is made ever more difficult because professional journalism has a tendency to avoid controversy and passion such that it is not well suited to rousing the citizenry. What is passed off as serious news is often the dreadfully dull reporting of debates or pronouncements among people in power (Bernstein, 2000a, pp. 13, 17; *Economist*, October 7, 2000, p. 42). Or do they acknowledge depoliticization, especially among the commercially crucial 18–34 age group, and tailor the news to make it more entertaining and engaging to that target audience? Do they, in other words, opt for what Susan Douglas calls the “narcissism bias,” meaning news that accepts and therefore encourages political withdrawal by emphasizing trivia and “lifestyle” reporting?

(Douglas, 2003, p. 9). The news media have opted for this latter route as it makes far more commercial sense in the short term, but it also undermines the *raison d'être* of journalism (Barringer, 2002c, pp. C1, C5; Burkman, 2002; Johnson, 2002a). If people want light entertainment and unchallenging tidbits for their journalism, it makes far more sense to watch a comedy program than the news, and many Americans do exactly that. One 2000 study showed that more than one-third of Americans under 30 regard comedy shows like Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* as their primary source for news (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2002). Accordingly, a significant trend that has emerged in recent years is for local commercial television stations to discontinue their news programming (Schneider, 2002, p. 22; Trigoboff, 2002a, p. 29). After watering down and dumbing down TV news to the point it is a standing joke, while making a killing with inexpensive and inane fare, stations eventually find they have a shrinking audience so they close down the store. They have stripped the public airwaves for parts, so to speak.

One measure of the deep and severe crisis afflicting US journalism is to consider the morale and assessment of working editors and journalists. For decades journalists were highly sensitive to outside criticism of their profession, and proud of their role in society. Bookstores teemed with volumes penned by journalists telling of their impressive accomplishments. No more. In what is almost a sea change in temperament, the morale of journalists has gone into a tailspin as a result of the commercial assault on the news. Prominent journalists and media figures like John Hockenberry, David Halberstam, PBS president Pat Mitchell and Walter Cronkite decry the current situation, with Cronkite going so far as to question whether democracy can “even survive” (Halberstam, 2000, pp. 23–6; Margolis, 2002; McLeod, 2002; Ramon, 2002). Rank and file reporters compile volumes on the decline of journalism, replete with case study after case study.²⁶ Even Leonard Downie, Jr. and Robert G. Kaiser, the current national editor and associate editor of the *Washington Post*, in their 2002 *The News About the News: American journal-*

ism in peril make a devastating critique of the bankruptcy of US journalism, significantly due to commercial pressures, that would have been unthinkable two decades earlier (Downie, Jr. and Kaiser, 2002). Study after study, scientific or anecdotal, confirm this trend in chilling detail. Harvard's Howard Gardner and two other scholars published a long-term study of journalists in 2001, finding that journalists are "overwhelmed" by the commercial pressures on their craft, and find contemporary journalism a "nightmare." They despair because they are not "allowed to pursue the mission that inspired them to enter the field" (Gardner et al., 2001, Chap. 7). The *Columbia Journalism Review* published the results of a survey of TV news directors that concluded that, due overwhelmingly to commercial factors, "pessimism rules in TV newsrooms" (Potter, 2002, p. 90). Linda Foley, the president of the journalists union, the Newspaper Guild, reports that the number one concern of her members, far more than wages and job security, is the decline of their craft to commercial pressures.²⁷

Contemporary US journalism still has its defenders, of course, though they are fewer in ranks and they appear to have less swagger (Opel, 2002, p. E8; Parker, 2000, p. 20). The defense ultimately falls back upon the position that this is the media system we have, it is the best possible system for our society, so anything it generates has got to be good. And insofar as the news media raise these concerns about the commercialization of journalism before the public—something done very, very rarely—it tends to start and finish with the assumption of the inviolability of the *status quo*, hence handcuffing critical analysis. Increasingly, in academia and on the margins, however, sober voices are beginning to think (and write and speak) what was once unthinkable: is the corporate, commercial regulation of journalism compatible with a democratic society? Jay Harris, former publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News*, argues that the media are "so essential to our national democracy" that they should not "be managed primarily according to the demands of the market or the dictates of a handful of large shareholders" (Harris, Jay, 2001, p. 6). James Carey of the Columbia Jour-

nalism School, arguably the most influential US journalism scholar of the past generation, concluded a 2002 essay on the state of the news with the somber assessment that "the reform of journalism will only occur when news organizations are disengaged from the global entertainment and information industries that increasingly contain them." As Carey added, "Alas the press may have to rely upon a democratic state to create the conditions necessary for a democratic press to flourish and for journalists to be restored to their proper role as orchestrators of the conversation of a democratic culture" (Carey, 2002, p. 89). The political economic analysis of the media may well be entering its moment in the sun.

But Wait, Don't the Media Have a Liberal Bias?

Absent so far in this discussion of journalism has been an assessment of the proposition that the US news media have a liberal, even left-wing, political bias. The reason I have neglected this argument thus far is that this particular critique is not an institutional or political economic critique; indeed, political economic analysis highlights the severe shortcomings of this claim. But the claim that the news media have a liberal political bias is so widespread that it has come to play a crucial ideological role in the functioning of the news media system. In 2001 and 2002 no less than *three* books purporting to demonstrate and elaborate upon the media's liberal bias rested high atop the best-seller list (Coulter, 2002; Goldberg, 2001; Hannity, 2002). It has become, in effect, the official opposition to the media *status quo*, and is so regarded by a large number of Americans. Even more important, the right-wing campaign against the "liberal media" has influenced media content, pushing journalists to be less critical of right-wing politics in their never-ending (and never successful) quest to establish their lack of bias against the political right. For these reasons the conservative criticism of the "liberal media" merits our attention.

The very idea of a "liberal" bias in the news media is a very American proposition; in Britain and Canada, for example, there is noth-

ing remotely close to it in magnitude. To some extent that is a measure of just how successful the notion of professional journalism was ingrained during the 20th century on the United States, with the organizing principle that democratic journalism should be, could be, and must be politically impartial (Coulter, 2002; Goldberg, 2001; Hannity, 2002). Once the notion of professional journalism became dominant, the importance of the views and conduct of working journalists assumed greater importance relative to the broader institutional determinants of journalism. Mainstream media analysis is mostly concerned with commercial and government encroachment on journalistic autonomy, and with journalists receiving proper professional training. The conservative critique is a variant of the mainstream analysis and is concerned with how journalists would abuse their newfound power to distort the news to serve their own political agendas. This, too, was and is considered a violation of the professional code. Such criticism would have been nonsensical prior to the professional era, when journalism explicitly represented the values of the owners, who tended to have the politics of the owning class, to be conservative.

The conservative critique is based then on four propositions: (1) the decisive power over the news lies with the journalists, owners and advertisers are irrelevant or relatively powerless; (2) journalists are political liberals; (3) journalists use their power to advance liberal politics; and (4) objective journalism would almost certainly present the world exactly as seen by contemporary US conservatives. For this argument to hold, the first three conditions must be met. For this argument to hold, and for one to maintain a commitment to professional journalism as it is presently understood, the fourth condition must also be met.

The first point is intellectually indefensible and is enough to call the entire conservative critique of the liberal news media into question. No credible scholarly analysis of journalism posits that journalists have the decisive power to determine what is and is not news and how it should be covered. In commercial media, the owners hire and fire and they determine the budgets and the overarching aims of the enter-

prise. As Robert Parry puts it, "in reality, most journalists have about as much say over what is presented by newspapers and TV news programs as factory workers and foremen have over what a factory produces" (Parry, 2003). Successful journalists, and certainly those who rise to the top of the profession, tend to internalize the values of those who own and control the enterprise. Sophisticated scholarly analysis examines how these commercial pressures shape what become the professional values that guide journalists.²⁸ In fact, conservatives tacitly acknowledge the transparently ideological basis of the claim that journalists have all the power over the news. The real problem is not that journalists have all the power over the news, or even most of the power, it is that they have *any* power to be autonomous from owners and advertisers, whom conservatives generally regard as having the proper political worldview, so their influence is not a problem. (Some conservative media critics like Brent Bozell attempt to argue that media corporations have a left-wing political bias, but the evidence used to support these claims is so preposterous most conservatives avoid the topic altogether.²⁹) Newt Gingrich, with typical candor and a lack of PR rhetoric, laid bare the logic behind the conservative critique: what needs to be done is to eliminate journalistic autonomy, and return the politics of journalism to the politics of media owners (McChesney, 1999, p. 245). This also helps to explain why US conservatives tend to be obsessed with pushing public broadcasting to operate by commercial principles; they know that the market will very effectively push the content to more politically acceptable outcomes, without any need for direct censorship (Jarvik, 1997).

The second proposition—that journalists are liberals—has the most evidence to support it. Surveys show that journalists tend to vote Democratic at a greater proportion than the general population. In one famous survey of how Washington correspondents voted in the 1992 presidential election, something like 90 percent voted for Bill Clinton. To some conservative critics, that settles the matter. But the first point undermines the importance of how journalists vote, or what their particular politi-

cal beliefs might be. What if owners and managers have most of the power, both directly and through the internalization of their political and commercial values in the professional code? Surveys show that media owners and editorial executives vote overwhelmingly Republican. An *Editor & Publisher* survey found that in 2000 newspaper publishers favored George W. Bush over Al Gore by a 3 to 1 margin, while newspaper editors and publishers together favored Bush by a 2 to 1 margin (*Editor & Publisher*, 2000). In addition, why should a vote for Al Gore or Bill Clinton be perceived as a reflection of liberal politics? On many or most policies these are moderate to conservative Democrats, very comfortable with the *status quo* of the US political economy.

What this begs, then, is an analysis of what, exactly, a liberal is.³⁰ To listen to the shock troops of conservative media critics, support for Gore or Clinton is virtually indistinguishable from being an anarcho-syndicalist or a Marxist-Leninist. One right-wing pundit echoed this sentiment when he called the editors of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* “die-hard old school socialists” (Adkins, 2002). But this is absurd. The actual record of the US news media is to pay very little attention to what might be called the political left, and by this we mean not only socialists and radicals but also what would be called mild social democrats by international standards. What attention the left actually gets tends to be unsympathetic, if not explicitly negative. Foreign journalists write about how US left-wing social critics who are prominent and respected public figures abroad are virtually non-persons in the US news media (Stille, 2000; Zerbisias, 2002). To the extent there is a basis for the claim, conservatives are able to render synonymous Clinton Democrats and radical leftists because of their main criteria for what is a liberal. It is based upon what are called social issues, such as a commitment to gay rights, women’s rights, abortion rights, civil liberties, and affirmative action. And indeed, on these issues a notable percentage of journalists tend to have positions similar to many of those to their left.

The Achilles heel for this conservative critique of journalist liberalism, and therefore

entirely absent from their pronouncements, however, is a consideration of journalists’ views on issues of the economy and regulation. Here, unlike with social issues, surveys show that journalists hold positions that tend to be more pro-business and conservative than the bulk of the population. Indeed, by looking at questions surrounding class and economic matters, the (suspect) argument that journalists’ personal biases and political opinions determine the news would lead in a very different direction than conservative media critics suggest. Over the past two generations, journalism, especially at the larger and more prominent news media, has evolved from being a blue-collar job to becoming a desirable occupation of the well-educated upper-middle class. Urban legend has it that when the news of the stock market crash came over the ticker to the *Boston Globe* newsroom in 1929, the journalists all arose to give Black Monday a standing ovation. The rich were finally getting their comeuppance! When the news of the stock market crash reached the *Globe* newsroom in 1987, on the other hand, journalists were all frantically on the telephone to their brokers. As recently as 1971 just over one-half of US newspaper journalists had college degrees; by 2002 nearly 90 percent did. The median salary for a journalist at one of the 40 largest circulation newspapers in the United States in 2002 was nearly double the media income for all US workers (Shaw, 2002). Journalists at the dominant media are unlikely to have any idea what it means to go without health insurance, to be unable to locate affordable housing, to have their children in underfunded and dilapidated schools, to have relatives in prison or the front lines of the military, to face the threat of severe poverty. They live in a very different world from most Americans. They may be “liberal” on certain issues, but on the core issues of political economy, they are hardly to the left of the US population, and they tend to be quite comfortable with the corporate *status quo*. To the extent their background and values determine the news, it is unlikely to expect journalists to be sympathetic to traditional liberal, not to mention left-wing, policies and regulations.

As for the third proposition, that journalists

use their power to advance liberal politics, the evidence is far from convincing. One of the core points of the professional code is to prevent journalists from pushing their own politics on to the news, and many journalists are proud to note that while they are liberal, their coverage tended to bend the stick the other way, to prevent the charge that they have a liberal bias and are unprofessional. As one news producer stated, “the main bias of journalists is the bias not to look like they favor liberals.”³¹ “One of the biggest career threats for journalists,” a veteran Washington reporter wrote in 2002, “is to be accused of ‘liberal bias’ for digging up stories that put conservatives in a bad light” (Parry, 2002). Moreover, research shows that while many journalists may have liberal politics on social issues, few of them are political junkies. Often they are cynical and depoliticized, much like the general public. If they are obsessed with advancing a political agenda, they tend to become columnists or leave the profession, as the professional constraints are too great. At its best, but only rarely, the conservative critique has emphasized not the aggressive liberalism of individual reporters—for which there is little evidence—but, rather, how liberal political values are inscribed into the professional code (Leo, 2001, p. A8). This is where the conservative critique has a political economic basis. Hence any journalist who receives professional training, regardless of their personal political inclinations, is trained to adopt liberal politics and regard them as neutral and nonpartisan. But, to the extent this argument holds, this is a liberalism that is fully comfortable with the *status quo*; it is the left wing of elite opinion; it is not radical. (And as elite opinion has moved rightward, the liberalism of the professional code has diminished.) To the extent professional autonomy collapses, so too does the importance of the liberal bias built into the professional code.

As for the final proposition, that truly objective journalism would invariably see the world exactly the way Rush Limbaugh sees it, this points to the ideological nature of the exercise. Despite the attention paid to the news, there has never been an instance of conservatives criticizing journalism for being too soft on a

right-wing politician or unfair to liberals or the left. It is a one-way street. Conservatives would respond that this is what all media criticism is about—whining that your side is getting treated unfairly. In 1992 Rich Bond, then the chair of the Republican Party, acknowledged that the point of bashing the liberal media was to “work the refs” like a basketball coach does, with the goal that “maybe the ref will cut you a little slack on the next one.”³² And some journalists come to dismiss examinations of journalistic bias as exercises in opportunism, that simply come with the territory. They can say, “Hey, we are being shot at from both sides, so we must be doing it right.” The problem with that response is that it absolves the media of actually addressing the specific charges; since they balance each other they can be dismissed categorically. As one wag has pointed out, even the Nazi media had a few fanatical critics who thought it was insufficiently anti-Semitic or anti-Communist, at least in the 1930s. Since it was therefore getting “shot at from both sides,” does that mean the Nazi press was doing it right? Political economy, like all scholarship, attempts to provide a coherent and intellectually consistent explanation of journalism that can withstand critical interrogation. The conservative critique of the liberal news media is an intellectual failure, riddled with contradictions and inaccuracy.

So why is the conservative critique of the liberal news media such a significant force in US political and media culture? To some extent this is because the conservative critique of the liberal media has tremendous emotional power, fitting into a broader story of the conservative masses battling the establishment liberal media elite. In this world, spun by the likes of Ann Coulter and Sean Hannity, conservatives do righteous battle against the alliance of Clinton, Castro, bin Laden, drug users, gays, rappers, feminists, teachers unions, vegetarians and journalists, who hold power over the world. As one conservative activist put it, the battle over media is a “David and Goliath struggle.”³³ At its strongest, and most credible, the conservative critique taps into the elitism inherent to professionalism and to liberalism, though this populism turns to mush once the issue of class

is introduced. Some conservative media criticism backs away from fire breathing, and attempts to present a more tempered critique, even criticizing the rampant commercialization of journalism. Bernard Goldberg's *Bias*, for example, was criticized for its shoddy use of evidence, but aspects of the critique having little to do with the "David versus Goliath" mythology rang true, and made the book credible.³⁴ As Steve Rendall of the left-liberal media watch group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting put it, "big chunks of the book actually point to FAIR's point of view" (Jurkowitz, 2002).

The main reason for the prominence of the conservative critique of the liberal news media, however, has little or nothing to do with the intellectual quality of the arguments. It is the result of hardcore political organizing to produce that result. The conservative movement against liberal journalism was launched in earnest in the 1970s. Pro-business foundations were aghast at what they saw as the anti-business sentiment prevalent among Americans, especially middle-class youth, usually a core constituency for support. Mainstream journalism, which in reporting the activities of official sources was giving people like Ralph Nader sympathetic exposure, was seen as a prime culprit. At that point the pro-business "neoliberal" political right began to devote enormous resources to criticizing and changing the news media (People for the American Way, 1995). Around one-half of all the expenditures of the 12 largest conservative foundations have been devoted to the task of moving the news rightward. This has entailed funding the training of conservative and business journalists at universities, creating conservative media to provide a training ground, establishing conservative think tanks to flood journalism with pro-business official sources, and incessantly jawboning any coverage whatsoever that is critical of conservative interests as being reflective of "liberal" bias (Dolny, 2000, p. 23; Campbell, K., 2002b; Conniff, K., 2001; Harden, 2001, p. A8; Hussein, 2000, p. 23). The pro-business right understood that changing media was a crucial part of bringing right-wing ideas into prominence, and politicians into power. "You get huge leverage for your dollars," a

conservative philanthropist noted when he discussed the turn to ideological work (Kuttner, 2002a). There is a well-organized, well-financed and active hardcore conservative coterie working to push the news media to the right. As a *Washington Post* White House correspondent put it, "the liberal equivalent of this conservative coterie does not exist" (Harris, J.F., 2001, p. B1).

The success of the right-wing campaign in popularizing the view that the news media have a liberal bias has been accomplished to some extent by constant repetition without any significant countervailing position. Crucial to the promotion of the idea that the news media are liberal have been, ironically enough, the so-called liberal media. One study of press coverage between 1992 and 2002 finds that references to the liberal bias of the news media outnumber those to a conservative bias by a factor of more than 17 to 1 (Nunberg, 2002a). It is trumpeted far and wide by the media, such that the conservative critique is well known to millions of Americans as the *only* dissident criticism of the media. The conservative critique is in some respects the "official opposition" of professional journalism, because in a sense journalists have to be seen as "liberals" for the system to have credibility. Were journalists seen as cravenly bowing before wealth and privilege, it would undermine the credibility of the enterprise as an autonomous democratic force. After all, that is a significant part of what led to the rise of professional journalism in the first place. The conservative criticism is also rather flattering to journalists; it says to them: you have all the power and the problem is you use that power to advance the interests of the poor and minorities (or government bureaucrats and liberal elitists) rather than the interests of corporations and the military (or middle America). A political economic critique, which suggests that journalists have much less power and that they are largely the unwitting pawns of forces that make them the agents of the *status quo*, is much less flattering and almost nowhere to be found.

Of even greater significance, this right-wing campaign has been successful in actually making the news media more sympathetic to right-

wing politicians and pro-corporate policies. The move of journalism to the right has been aided by three other factors. First, the right wing of the Republican party, typified by Reagan and now Bush, has gained considerable political power while the Democratic party has become significantly more pro-business in its outlook. This means that editors and journalists following the professional code are simply going to have much greater exposure through official sources to neoliberal and conservative political positions. The body of liberal official sources that existed in the 1960s and 1970s is relatively smaller and far less influential. Second, as we discussed above, the basis for the conservative critique of the liberal media—the autonomy of journalists from owners, the separation of church and state—has diminished over the past 20 years. There is less protection to keep journalists independent, implicitly and explicitly, of the politics of the owners. Yet the conservative critique lives on, as prominent as ever. To the extent it does is an indication of how much the critique is an ideological exercise in harassing the media to provide more pro-neoliberal coverage, rather than a genuine attempt to make sense of how and why journalism is produced the way it is. Third, conservatives move comfortably in the corridors of the corporate media. This is precisely what one would expect. Journalists who praise corporations and commercialism will be held in higher regard (and given more slack) by owners and advertisers than journalists who are routinely critical of them. Much is made of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel, which seemingly operates as an adjunct of the Republican Party, but the point holds across the board.³⁵ Several progressive radio hosts, for example, have had their programs cancelled although they had satisfactory ratings and commercial success, because the content of their shows did not sit well with the station owners and managers (Pohlman, 2000, p. 22).

In sum, the conservative campaign against the liberal media has meshed comfortably with the commercial and political aspirations of media corporations. The upshot is that by the early years of the 21st century the conservatives have won. The *Washington Post's* E.J. Dionne

termed this a "genuine triumph for conservatives." "The drumbeat of conservative press criticism has been so steady, the establishment press has internalized it" (Dionne, Jr., 2002, p. A4, A5). By 2001 CNN's chief Walter Isaacson was soliciting conservatives to see how he could make the network more palatable to them. In their quieter moments conservatives acknowledge the victory, though they will insist that the victory is justified (Kelly, 2002, p. A7). But the general pattern is that conservative pundits dominate in the commercial news media with the incessant refrain that the media are dominated by ... liberals. The news media diet of the average American runs is drawn from a menu tilted heavily to the right. Talk radio, which plays a prominent role in communities across the nation, "tends to run the gamut from conservative to ... very conservative," as one reporter puts it (Fahri, 2002, p. C1). By 2003, a Gallup Poll survey showed that 22 percent of Americans considered talk radio to be their primary source for news, double the figure from 1998 (Carney, 2003). TV news runs from pro-business centrist to rabidly pro-business right, and most newspaper journalism is no better. All told, the average American cannot help but be exposed to a noticeable double standard that has emerged in the coverage of mainstream politicians and politics.

Looking at the different manner in which the press has portrayed and pursued the political careers of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush reveals the scope of the conservative victory. A Nexis search, for example, reveals that there were 13,641 stories about Clinton avoiding the military draft, and a mere 49 stories about Bush having his powerful father use influence to get him put at the head of the line to get into the National Guard.³⁶ Bill Clinton's small time Whitewater affair justified a massive seven-year, \$70 million open-ended special investigation of his business and personal life that never established any criminal business activity, but eventually did produce the Lewinsky allegations. Rick Kaplan, former head of CNN, acknowledged that he instructed CNN to provide the Lewinsky story massive attention, despite his belief that it was overblown, because he knew he would face withering criti-

cism for a liberal bias if he did not do so.³⁷ George W. Bush, on the other hand, had a remarkably dubious business career in which he made a fortune flouting security laws, tapping public funds, and using his father's connections to protect his backside, but the news media barely sniffed at the story and it received no special prosecutor (Evans, 2002; Krugman, 2002a; Teather, 2002). One doubts the head of CNN goes to sleep at night in fear of being accused of being too soft on Bush's business dealing. Or imagine, for one second, what the response of Rush Limbaugh, the Fox News Channel, talk radio, and soon thereafter the entirety of political journalism, would have been if more than a year after the 9/11 attack, a president Al Gore had not yet captured Osama bin Laden! The list goes on and on. As Robert Kuttner observed in 2003, "What if there were a failed administration and nobody noticed?" (Kuttner, 2003). It may help to explain why polls have shown throughout his presidency that Bush receives fairly high approval ratings from voters, but when queried on specific issues they tend to disagree with him.

The conservative campaign against the liberal media is hardly the dominant factor in understanding news media behavior. It works in combination with the broader limitations of

professional journalism as well as the commercial attack upon journalism. Conservative ideology and commercialized, depoliticized journalism have meshed very well, and it is this combination that defines the present moment.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented a political economic critique of contemporary US journalism, emphasizing the origins and limitations of professional journalism, the commercial attack upon journalism, and the right-wing critique of the "liberal media." In my view, the US polity is enmeshed in a deep crisis and the collapse of a viable journalism is a significant factor—but by no means the only one—in explaining the shriveled and dilapidated state of US democracy. A political economic analysis stresses that the reasons for lousy journalism stem not from morally bankrupt or untalented journalists, but from a structure that makes such journalism the rational result of its operations. Hence if we are serious about producing a journalism and political culture suitable to a self-governing society, it is mandatory that there be structural change in the media system. This means explicit and major changes in the public policies that have created and spawned the media *status quo*.

Notes

- ¹ For somewhat different accounts that draw in valuable material, see Kaplan, R. (2002) and Mindich (1998).
- ² For the classic statement on professional journalism, see Pulitzer (1989, pp. 190–9).
- ³ The classic treatments of this topic include: Tuchman (1978); Gans (1979); Fishman (1980). For a more recent critique, from a Canadian perspective, see Hackett and Zhao (1998).
- ⁴ I am indebted to Ben Bagdikian for much of what follows. See Bagdikian (2000).
- ⁵ For a brilliant discussion of this and its implications for democracy, see Lasch (1995, Chap. 9).
- ⁶ Interview with Charles Lewis, in *Orwell Rolls Over in his Grave*, documentary by Robert Pappas (2002).
- ⁷ For examples of the CPI's work, go to www.publicintegrity.org.
- ⁸ See, for example, Epstein (1973); Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999); Bennett (2001); Scheuer (1999).
- ⁹ See, for example, Serrin and Serrin (2002); Woodhull and Snyder (1998).
- ¹⁰ For a collection of their reports collected into a book, see Bartlett and Steele (1992).
- ¹¹ See, for example, Pring and Canan (1983, 1996).
- ¹² Much of this has been written by prominent journalists like Bagdikian. See also, Squires (1993); Underwood (1993); McManus (1994).
- ¹³ The definitive work on this issue is Kimball (1994).
- ¹⁴ Robert W. McChesney interview of Rick Kaplan, former president of CNN, March 2001.
- ¹⁵ See Note 6.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, Stevenson and Bumiller (2002, pp. A1, A14); Mitchell (2002, p. A9).
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Moy and Pfau (2000).
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Jackson and Hart (2001, pp. 15–22).
- ¹⁹ See Lasica (2001); Moraes (2002a, p. C7); for a longer discussion of the corporate influence over ABC News, see Meyer (2000, pp. 30–6).

- ²⁰ See, for example, Kuczynski (2001, pp. C1, C13).
- ²¹ See, for example, Hall, L. (2002, pp. 26, 32).
- ²² See, for example, Puette (1992).
- ²³ Eichenwald (2002, p. A1); for what the media missed at the time, see Ebbers (2002, p. 11).
- ²⁴ The party was videotaped and released in December 2002. See Associated Press (2002).
- ²⁵ See, for example, Oppel, Jr. (2002, p. C6).
- ²⁶ See, for example, Serrin (2000); Borjesson (2002).
- ²⁷ Robert W. McChesney interview with Linda Foley, Washington DC, July 2002.
- ²⁸ See, for a recent example, Hall Jamieson and Waldman (2003).
- ²⁹ See Bozell III and Baker (1990). To establish that even media corporations like General Electric have a “liberal” bias, the authors point to how GE’s philanthropic arm gives a few hundred thousand dollars annually to numerous mainstream groups (e.g. the NAACP, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Audubon Society). GE’s enormous contributions to politicians and multi-million dollar lobbying armada do not rate any mention whatsoever.
- ³⁰ Another question to be asked, is what, exactly, is a conservative? The “business-can-do-no-wrong” neoliberal of the early 21st century is a very different animal from the classical conservative of earlier times.
- ³¹ Telephone interview with Jeff Cohen, producer, Donahue show, MSNBC, December 2002.
- ³² Quoted in *The Washington Post*, August 20, 1992.
- ³³ Comment of Joseph Farah, in O’Keefe (2002).
- ³⁴ Geoffrey Nunberg demolished Bias in a series of articles in 2002. See, for example, Nunberg (2002b).
- ³⁵ See, for example, Parry (2003); Carter and Rutenberg (2002, p. A24); Rendall (2001, p. 13).
- ³⁶ Statistic provided by Begala (2001).
- ³⁷ Robert W. McChesney interview with Rick Kaplan, Urbana, Illinois, March 2002.

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