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Andrew Calabrese and Barbara Ruth Burke
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American Identities: Nationalism, the Media, and the Public Sphere

Introduction

This paper draws a link between the construction and maintenance of American myths and identities and the nature of mass communication systems in the United States. In it, we discuss some generally recognized but arguable limitations of and possibilities for the use of existing mass media institutions and technologies, and we assess alternatives. Mass media institutions are central to the American public sphere, although it would be technologically deterministic to suggest that they are the exclusive means by which American identities are created or maintained. Other means—the institutions of religion, family, education, and government, the activities of work and recreation, and the immediate spatial contexts of neighborhood, community, and municipality—are too numerous and complex to discuss in the span of a single paper. Indeed, so are the numerous dimensions and complexities of the media's role in punctuating and influencing our lives. The more modest goal of this paper is to describe one essential tension which, while it may not be unique to American society, certainly has deep roots here. The mass media, particularly newspapers, magazines, broadcasting and cable, possess a unique capacity to claim national attention and often are considered to be representative of the common needs and interests of the majority of Americans. The resulting tension discussed below is that which stems from the media's role in representing an "American" identity, which by itself is profoundly problematic, and from competing identities which, some argue, are causing the fractionization of American society.

In this paper, we characterize a fundamental tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces in American public life as dangerous. This argument relates to a more general topic, namely, the theoretical discourse on post-modernism. The particular linkage we see stems from the question

of whether the forces for pluralism and equality are at fundamental odds with the prospect for the unity and coherence of the social and political category sometimes referred to as "the public sphere." Perhaps the most divisive aspects of American society today are the much-publicized racial and ethnic hostilities and, perhaps to a lesser extent at present, the tensions which stem from concerns by feminists, peace activists, ecologists, gay and lesbian communities, and other collectives seeking to assert not only the uniqueness of their identities but increasingly to exert influence in politics at the personal, local, national, regional, and global levels. In a country where the "melting pot" metaphor has long been promoted as a positive feature, there is now more than ever a fueling of conflict between national identity and other identities which are posed in opposition, a conflict which the national media has exacerbated.

The melting pot ideology has tended to treat the assertion of non-nationalist identities as divisive, thus privileging a rhetoric of uncritical nationalistic fervor built on the nation state rather than, say, ethnic, racial, or regional identities. Not surprisingly, it is a commonplace for some of our own country's key political leaders to haughtily decry as backward and disruptive the nationalisms erupting among minority populations in many other countries. From the vantage point of a relatively stable nation state, this instrumental tendency to view "other" nationalisms as regressive while conveniently underplaying its internal presence is not new, as Raymond Williams (1983) observed. Williams argues that nationalism secured and enjoyed by an established and domestically impregnable regime (as in the U.S.) is rarely identified as nationalism per se:

It is as if a really secure nationalism, already in possession of its nation-state, can fail to see itself as "nationalism" at all. Its own distinctive bonding is perceived as natural and obvious by contrast with the mere projections of any nationalism which is still in active progress and thus incomplete. (1983, 183)

Williams's own preoccupation with the foundations of nationalism in the modern nation state come from his concern with how the concept of "community" comes to be used by ruling elites as a means of "ratifying or overriding unequal social and economic development, and of containing the protests and resentments of neglected and marginalized regions and minorities within an imposed general 'patriotism'" (1983, 197).¹ Following Williams, we take this analysis and develop it further in our examination of the media's role in fostering nationalism in America.

In this analysis, we focus primarily on the American national media system, although we do not address at any length the importance of the power of media *audiences*. However, we do not wish to underemphasize the significance of the social experiences of media consumers against the problematic theoretical abstraction of the "powerful media." We do not conceptualize audiences as either homogeneous or docile, although we do share skepticism toward exaggerated claims of methodologically limited research which overstates and celebrates the "active" role of audiences in

the processes of consumption. As Jensen's (1990) useful critique notes, research stressing the power of media consumers not only makes the point that audiences "appropriate and transform meaning for their own ends," a claim requiring numerous caveats, it also asserts "that audiences may be resistant to the mass-mediated constructions of reality and thus presumably also to any ideological impact of mass communication," a claim which has generated considerable and warranted skepticism (57). In one of the more forceful and clearest attacks on this position, Herbert Schiller (1989) warns that such research yields the potentially dangerous by-product of comforting dominant industry and policy decision makers with the implicit message that they are doing a good job: "Theories that ignore the structure and locus of representational and definitional power and emphasize instead the individual's message transformational capability present little threat to the maintenance of the established order" (156). Of course, it is as dubious to assume that all pleasure is duped pleasure as it is to assume that we need only watch TV and liberate ourselves through unmediated "pleasure." Nevertheless, we share doubt over the idea that there is a necessary correspondence between the possibilities versus the present realities of pluralism and equality in the creation of meaning.

In examining the idea of the public sphere below, particularly the role of mass media institutions, we look at the changing self-definition of Americans and their nation state in world affairs. As its external relations are re-negotiated and re-aligned to meet the sea-change of political and economic transformation worldwide, America's internal politics have undergone some parallel re-alignments, not the least of which is evidenced by economic crisis and growing American nationalism. Our analysis of the American national media in this trend is more structural than instrumental, and we avoid claims of conspiracy.² In the following section we provide an elaboration of how we conceptualize "the public sphere" and what role we see mass media institutions playing within it.

The Public Sphere and Media Myths in an Age of Legal Persons

Before discussing problems of defining the media's role in the American "public sphere," it is useful to discuss the theoretical and practical significance of current uses of the term itself. Jurgen Habermas (1974, 1989) is widely credited as the most important theorist in recent intellectual history to provide a detailed examination of the idea of a public sphere mediating the state and civil society, a sphere seen as spanning a broader domain than media institutions alone but which nevertheless includes the media (see also Habermas 1975). Habermas argues that the contemporary political institutions of advanced capitalism disguise the changing structure of the public sphere by fostering the public sentiment that they continue to function as they did in the time of their formation in the era of eighteenth

century liberal capitalism: "Large organizations strive for political compromises with the state and with each other, excluding the public sphere whenever possible" while at the same time attempting to "assure themselves of at least plebiscitary support from the mass of the population through an apparent display of openness" (Habermas 1974, 5). Habermas laments that the contemporary purpose of publicity is not "to subject persons or affairs to public reason, and to make political decisions subject to appeal before the court of public opinion," but rather to win acclamation for arcane policies which already were decided and now only require formalization through public ritual (1974, 55). This tendency undermines what for Habermas is the authentic purpose of publicity, which is the subjecting of political argument to public participation and scrutiny.

Following Habermas, Norberto Bobbio (1989) presents the parallel and related terms "the publicization of the private" and "the privatization of the public." In the former, the state meddles increasingly in private affairs. In the latter, private interests increasingly steer state power for particularistic ends. While both are present in advanced capitalism, the privatization of the public is viewed as more symptomatic. In defining the term "public," Bobbio presents it in a manner consistent with Habermas's usage in that he seeks a distinction between two types of power: the *nature of power*, that is, whether in fact the power in question is rightfully the power of a sovereign public, and the *publicity of power*, or the publicization of decisions made and actions taken in the name of the public interest. Regrettably, much that is defined in contemporary political discourse as "public affairs" reflects the publicity of power yet conceals the nature of that power. Hence, Bobbio is concerned with how publicity is used to conceal the true nature of power and he notes that in a democratic state this "invisible power" is even provided for by law in order to protect state secrets.³ In formally democratic societies, this is most clearly evidenced in the emergency powers at the discretion of the chief executive in the name of national security. Arguably, this phenomenon is evident in the degree to which the mainstream media were uncritical and essentially supportive of the federal administration's military initiatives in the Persian Gulf (publicization of the private).⁴ But the idea that power is concealed does not apply to state secrets alone since, as Bobbio observes, the exercise of invisible power is, in part, a matter of public-private back scratching. This is evident in the manner in which the U.S. federal government increasingly permits rather than prohibits media concentration and vertical integration, and the degree to which it has consented to the elimination of the broadcast media's public service requirements (privatization of the public).

In a critique of Habermas, Nancy Fraser (1989, 1990) joins those who have highlighted the reproduction of class privilege in the bourgeois public sphere (e.g., Negt and Kluge 1983, 1990) and argues further that the discourses of other "subaltern counterpublics" besides the proletariat have been systematically marginalized as well. She is particularly keen to ex-

pose the myth that fundamental differences in identity can be set aside for the sake of the pursuit of just decisions, and she argues that such an oversight serves at the theoretical level to reproduce systemic inequalities. From Fraser's perspective, the goal of a democratic society should not be to disallow differences and inequalities in representation in the pursuit of a melting pot ideology. Rather, she asks how it is possible to advance a multicultural, egalitarian society in which there are numerous *publics* seeking to publicize their needs and strategies, which is also a society where these publics can, when necessary, "entertain debates over policies and issues affecting everyone" (1990, 69). Fraser argues for the politicization of a broader set of public spaces in which direct democratic participation is possible but unrealized. From this perspective, we can see an emphasis both on the idea of the "common good" and on diversity, rather than simply the former. In considering the possibility of discourse about the common good, Fraser argues that we can not know in advance whether a deliberation will result in agreement on what constitutes shared needs and interests in any one situation. By refusing to presume that the common good can be known in advance or whether consensus about its nature will be achieved, "then there is no warrant for putting any strictures on what sorts of topics, interests, and views are admissible in deliberation" (1990, 72).

Fraser's critique resonates with others who have argued for re-defining the idea of "the political" (e.g., Melucci 1985; Offe 1987). These perspectives have, in essence, sought to reconcile material demands, particularly those of labor movements in industrial society, with what Offe (perhaps misleadingly) labels the "post-materialist" demands of post-industrial society. A key characteristic associated with these movements is that they do not seek institutionalization while at the same time they seek to have a radical impact on the transformation of political, economic, and cultural institutions. While maintaining that social movements can never "exhaust themselves in representation," Melucci (1985) acknowledges that "social movements can't survive in complex societies without some forms of political representation" (815). Nevertheless, he argues that the goal of a "new political space" between state and civil society should be to simultaneously enable movements to maintain their autonomy without institutionalizing themselves (for instance, into unions and political parties) while making society "hear their messages and translate these messages into political decision making." This "enlargement of the public space" is, for Melucci, "the task for a real 'postindustrial' democracy" (1985, 815-16). Indeed, new social movements may succeed more fully in national politics insofar as they manage to bring international pressure to bear upon the state. Melucci notes, for example, that peace mobilizations have "fundamental *transnational effects*" (1985, 813). One can also see this increasingly with ecology mobilizations as a growing number of transnational corporations deploy ecologically devastating operations in Third World countries while such activities are banned or severely limited

in the countries in which those corporations are headquartered. While it is questioned whether these movements sufficiently problematize contemporary manifestations of class inequity (Offe acknowledges the privileged class status of movement actors), social movement theories nevertheless are generally socialist in their interpretive and normative approaches to public life.

Social movement theorists tend to share frustration about and pose alternatives to a singular public sphere for deliberation and decision-making. In Fraser's (1989, 1990) case this is reflected in a concern with the limits of representation through state power, and hope for the prospects of direct participation in the articulation of needs in a formally democratic society. Fraser's argument suggests that the possibility that individuals can participate directly in deliberations and decisions about their own lives comes to seem out of reach if the activities of the *state* are the sole or primary focus of our civic culture. In response, she advocates the idea of a post-bourgeois public sphere which does not require a sharp separation between "associational" (civil) society and the state, for such a separation promotes "weak publics" who engage in opinion formation but not in decision making. However, she notes, in the case of "strong publics," namely, the legislature (but also, arguably, the fourth estate), opinion formation *and* decision making are combined, thus already blurring the boundary between state and civil society. Consistent with our earlier discussion of Bobbio, who suggests that a sharp separation of public and private power exists today only in appearance, Fraser presents a challenge to the charade in the contemporary bourgeois and patriarchal public sphere which suggests that it is anything but representative of particularistic interests.

The problem to which Fraser draws attention is the limited accountability which a representational strong public has to its constituent weak publics. As a solution, Fraser promotes the greater proliferation of strong publics beyond those which now exist, for the state should not be depended upon as the sole guarantor of liberty and democracy. The idea of strong publics only existing at the level of the state offers little hope for individuals to live, work, and play under circumstances which they themselves can control through democratic means. The logical extension of this argument is that the nominally representative manifestations of the national public sphere, which would include the national media, should not be viewed as constituting the only spaces in which publics can engage in deliberation and decision making in a democratic manner. A related problem is the extent to which struggles for identity should be viewed as quests for dominance over the nation state. This issue arises amid growing talk of the declining power of the nation-state and the expanding power of transnational corporations. Indeed, transnational corporations are not alone in moving beyond the nation-state, as global feminist, peace, and ecology movements illustrate.

Our next task is to illustrate the link which exists between the idea of an American public sphere and an American national identity in order to question further the depth of representation which is possible through a national discourse. As Michael Walzer (1990) notes, individuals and groups never readily or totally surrender their other identities to a nationalist impulse. Thus, the melting pot of a Soviet national identity has proved not to be sufficient to destroy the ethnic identities which refused to disappear. Likewise, and now increasingly evident, the melting pot of the United States has not managed to eliminate what Walzer calls "a demand for political recognition without assimilation, an assertion of interest-group politics against republican ideology" (1990, 613). Walzer is not suggesting that interest groups necessarily have sufficient cultural autonomy to effectively oppose nationalism. Rather, it would be more appropriate to conclude that authoritarian efforts to politically and culturally legislate nationalism may conceal widespread, passive resistance.⁵ However, at times, the pain of granting lip service to such efforts becomes too great and active political opposition emerges as a challenge to republican ideology.

An example of the "representative" public sphere's response to such opposition can be illustrated in the anti-pluralist rhetoric which underlies the recent categorical attacks which the national media have launched against academic discourse which addresses the systemic displacement of a wide range of social identities now posing significant challenges to a Eurocentric and American cultural hegemony (Calabrese and Lenart 1992). The contemporary populist and racist backlash waged against "political correctness" rests on a *volksisch* ideology, mildly similar to that which preceded the rise of national socialism in Weimar Germany. Today's movement, ostensibly dedicated to preserving Western (and, more specifically, American tradition), has a broad base of anti-intellectual support in efforts to purge cultural politics which are viewed as threatening to the ersatz national community, or what the Germans called *volks-gemeinschaft* (Silfen 1973; Stackelberg 1981). As in the late Weimar republic, the contemporary nationalist discourse also festers upon perceived external threats to national sovereignty (Japan, OPEC, the new Europe). Similarly, the contemporary discourse prizes military might and "national security" above all other responsibilities of a nation state towards its people, it exists in an era of increasing corporatism,⁶ and it characterizes class politics as divisive and opposed to the "common good."

What is "nationalism" and what concern does it provoke in our present context? According to Anthony Smith's (1977) definition, nationalism implies that "[t]he only genuine identity is a national one, and every man [sic], be he peasant or worker, merchant or intellectual, can only rediscover self and freedom through that new collective identity" (7). Although nationalism generally is distinguished from statism, the two are often very

closely aligned in the modern nation-state (Zelinsky 1988). "Nationalism" connotes the idea of primordiality or fundamentalism born of the grassroots, while "statism" leads us to a different idea, namely, that of faith in government's pre-eminent ability to respond to the common good and the will to deploy state machinery, whether it be in the form of welfare bureaucracies or the use of "legitimate" violence domestically and abroad to achieve national "goals." Unfortunately, the ideas of nation and state are easily collapsed as one, as we have seen most devastatingly in Germany of the 1930s and 1940s. In Nazi Germany, the coercive machinery of police and military power were put to the service of xenophobia and racist aggression born of the grassroots. This vivid reminder of the dark side of modern nationalism leads to a question which rightfully should trouble citizens of any nation state, namely, whether it is possible to be patriotic without being nationalistic.

In its 125th anniversary issue, *The Nation* magazine (July 1991) focused on the idea of "patriotism" and asked about one hundred prominent activists and intellectuals (not mutually exclusive categories) to write brief statements about the meaning the idea has for them. Among those was Ramsey Clark, former U.S. Attorney General:

Patriotism as commonly practiced has been a principal cause of war and exploitation. When it proclaims nationalist superiority over others, it is racist. When it compels absolute obedience to government authority, it is fascist. The greatest moral cowardice is obedience to an order to commit an immoral act. When patriotism calls for the use of force to have its way, it becomes criminal. Might does not make right among nations any more than it does among individuals. When patriotism seduces a people to celebrate a military slaughter, *the* people have lost their vision. (81)

The key words in this passage are "as commonly practiced," for it does not appear to be either Clark's aim nor that of any other of *The Nation*'s contributors to reject the idea of patriotism *per se*. Nevertheless, alternative meanings of patriotism carried little weight during the Gulf War, and indeed the introduction to this issue of *The Nation* notes that those who opposed the war were widely regarded as disloyal citizens.

Among those contributors who agree with Clark but who also wish to temper the zeal of those who would conflate patriotism and nationalism in order to condemn both, is media critic Neil Postman. He argues against forgetting that the United States remains a place of refuge in the world, where people still come to escape conditions they find politically, economically, or otherwise less humane, that a likeness of the America's symbol of liberty was displayed on Tiannenmen Square, and that the words of Thomas Jefferson were read aloud by protesting students in Prague. But equally important is the fact that Postman precedes these reminders by writing the following defense of the right of and the need for dissenting voices among patriots when they see such American ideals as liberty, pluralism and democracy being threatened:

As I see it, a patriot is someone who organizes his or her political and social values around a set of national ideals. *Patriotism does not imply love of government* and certainly does not require that one ignore the gap between a nation's ideals and its practices in actual social life. In fact, one of the important principles of the American Creed is that citizens have an obligation to criticize government and other actors in society when the disparity between ideal and reality becomes too great.⁷ (115, emphasis added)

Postman's definition implies that one can be patriotic without being an extreme nationalist and, consistent with Clark, he distinguishes between loyalty to national ideals and loyalty to the machinery of government.

Today, more than in the past several years, Americans find themselves forced by a preponderance of government- and media-supplied constructions of "patriotism" to reflect on whether they are patriotic, which is not to say they find themselves forced to reflect on the question "Which patriotism?" Is it the "patriotism" that was elided with extreme nationalism during the Gulf War? Or is it the patriotism which separates the love of nation with the right to dissent against the actions of inaccessible leaders controlling the state? Michael Walzer (1990) suggests that "patriotic fevers are the symptoms of a republican pathology" aimed at heightening commonality: "Since citizenship isn't guaranteed by oneness all the way down, patriots or superpatriots seek to guarantee it by loyalty oaths and campaigns against 'un-American' activities" (612).

Among the principal dangers to be feared in finding little basis of commonality among Americans besides nationalism are the lessons of Naziism and, as our own history illustrates, McCarthyism. As William Bloom and others have observed, a major thrust of McCarthyism was internal political competition aimed at appropriating national identity in the pursuit of what were potentially divisive Cold War foreign policy objectives (Bloom 1990). By fighting the Cold War at home and leading many politicians and middle-class Americans to join the right-wing offensive rather than risk becoming victims of an inquisition, McCarthyism solidified a militant American nationalism and hysteria. Although milder than Naziism, McCarthyism bore a similarity in that it had its own blatant racism which led many Americans to conceal their ethnic identities as well as their political views due to fears of having their livelihoods destroyed by being implicated as "loyalty risks." Today, the contemporary right tends to distance itself from the cruder excesses of Cold War hysteria, although militant nationalism and anti-Arab racism (notwithstanding the convenient Kuwaiti exceptionalism) were useful political tools for solidifying the foreign policy agenda in building domestic support for the war waged in the Persian Gulf by the policy makers of the United States. Subsuming all identities to a jingoistic *volksgemeinschaft* denies citizens the symbolic basis for direct participation and a sense of belonging to a collective that is not an abstraction such as the nation state. Citizens are offered a hollow experience of the meaning of democracy if the best they can hope for is to watch the evening report and cast their ballots on election day. Contrary to

concerns voiced by the contemporary right and amplified by the national media, participation in the construction, propagation, maintenance, and/or transformation of a wide variety of social identities besides membership in the nation state is hardly a necessary or sufficient precursor to the disintegration of national identity.

Given the limitations of the bourgeois public sphere described above, what would be most desirable in our national media would be equality of representation. But is this possible when, to use one example, we know that the credibility of news sources often depends directly on class, race, and gender privilege? Not reflecting too much hope for the flexibility and permeability of institutions (among which we include the media) to accommodate the ebb and flow of competing identities, Fraser (1990) calls for the *thematization* of those identities which dominate institutions. In the case of the media, this might translate into our expecting the national media to reflect continually and publicly on the possible nature of bias deriving from the voices that are privileged. Of course, this pill is a difficult one to swallow for at least two reasons, namely, people with power are not likely to voluntarily politicize it and, secondly, that it would be difficult at best to conceive of let alone implement clearly workable means by which the national media could be transformed to conform to some idealized calculus of proportional representation. But this is precisely the point, since the limits of the public sphere stem from the combined limitations of representation and the relative absence of participation. That is why the idea of a "representative democracy" which presumes to speak in the name of a national common good, a model into which the national media fits nicely, is a limited source of hope in the absence of democracy in our everyday lives (e.g., Walzer 1983; Held 1987). At the same time as awareness of these limitations casts doubt on the over-arching loyalty demanded by the nation-state, it also helps to familiarize citizens in a direct sense with the meaning of participatory democracy, which could help invigorate citizens to care more deeply about their national political culture than the idea summed up by the scribbling of an anonymous Montreal graffiti theorist who wrote: "If voting made a difference it would be illegal."

None of this is to propose that such a democratized civil society could do without the ability of a democratic state to challenge and moderate what otherwise might result in radically unequal distributions of power. Rather than advocating an anarchistic concept of civil society, it is a plea for a state which sees as its duty not only to sustain the best available means of democratic representation but also to promote greater democratic *participation* at all levels of society. For it is through this direct familiarization with democratic principles that an understanding of and appreciation for democratically ordered institutions at all levels can be derived. Equality of representation in the public sphere assumes equality of access among potential representatives, a remote prospect in today's media marketplace. Access to the major mass media in the U.S. is hope-

lessly out of reach by citizen-activists seeking to use them as fora for public participation and broadened representation, particularly on the national level. For example, what little media coverage there was of domestic opposition to the military intervention in the Persian Gulf was presented neither as a threat nor as a minority viewpoint worth serious attention, but rather as an anachronism. That is a regrettable function of public life in a society that depends on large-scale bureaucratic institutions which, in the absence of healthy alternatives, presume to represent its common concerns.

Colonial Mythology Reconsidered

In his history of American myth-making, James Robertson (1980) explains the significance of a thesis put forth by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), who argued that America's identity was bound up in the history of the frontier and a political and economic break from Europe. The thesis is the stuff of elementary texts in American history and has spawned many followers, for better or worse.⁸ According to the mythology of early America, Europe was seen as old, decadent, and corrupt, and at the same time seductive. Robertson suggests that Americans historically have believed that the greatest threat to their independence is to be tied economically or politically to Europe: "To be isolated from Europe was as vital in mythology to the freedom and independence of the nation as the break with family is to the freedom and independence of the adolescent" (1980, 76).

From the mythology of independence emerged the mythology of American individual freedom in general, particularly freedom of expression, which signifies for many an enduring tradition that is a foundation of American democracy. Among the fundamental premises of free expression in American democratic theory, as Thomas Emerson (1970) points out, are to provide an essential means of assuring individual self-fulfillment, thus enabling citizens to gain competence in the formation and expression of ideas and opinions, and to enhance opportunities for participation in decision making about public affairs, with the underlying assumption that the more open and responsive is the government then the closer it is to being brought to the will of the people. These and other premises discussed by Emerson not only emphasize the individual's right to expression, they also highlight that there is always a need to balance individual freedom against larger social goals such as rights of access to the media and a right to know (e.g., Barron 1973; Emerson 1976).

Despite the ideological usefulness of traditional concepts of press liberty, the media function much differently today than in colonial times. The modern mass media appeals, when necessary, to the romance and nostalgia of America's successful break from English colonialism, but the prevailing economic conditions and organizational complexity of print and electronic publishing today are radically different than those experi-

enced by the likes of John Peter Zenger. The colonial press was run by individuals or small collectives who generally penned their own words, cranked the manual presses, and hawked the resulting papers containing seeds of insurrection. By hearkening back to a rich mythology of colonial struggles, the heart-tugging stories of fights against government regulations by today's local cable monopolies with media conglomerate parents (e.g., Knox 1984) enables these "legal persons" to enjoy the individual guarantees provided in the Bill of Rights. The economic conditions of late capitalism differ markedly from those of the colonial and immediate post-colonial eras of American history. No longer does the press irreverently and seditiously antagonize a government toward which a majority of the people are opposed or distrustful. More often than sedition, today's mass media deploys the First Amendment to attend to more mundane matters, namely, the securing of profit and the removal of government interference with that unbridled pursuit.

Since the rise of mass production techniques in newspaper publishing at the time of the emergence of the penny press, the production of newspapers, magazines and books has become increasingly rationalized. Indeed, the evolution and use of machine technology and mass marketing for the production and distribution of newspapers, and the transfer of industrial techniques to the newer media of radio and television (e.g., routinization, mass marketing and distribution), are what have long led many authors to describe the media industries according to their commercial and profit imperatives first and foremost (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/1972; Enzensberger 1982; Tuchman 1978, 1983; Schiller 1989; Gitlin 1985). The powerful linkage between freedom of expression and property rights legitimizes the privatization of what otherwise might be treated as public fora and delegitimizes competing claims. Under these circumstances, the identities which the media reinforces are not only limited in terms of who participates in their construction, they also are limited by virtue of their not being representative of the nation's diversity. Given the ever-increasing media-government ties, our nationally based media institutions also seem prone, for self-interested reasons, to voice uncritical nationalist rhetoric in times when it is demanded by national leaders, as in a military crisis (O'Heffernan 1991).

Consistent with the pattern of increasing public-private coordination between the state and monopoly capital, the state authorizes industry concentration and integration in the name of *laissez faire* and free expression (Bagdikian 1987). In the process of securing the free speech of large corporations, the state and media cartels appropriate the fervent language of civil liberties, the result being that the only "individuals" granted meaningful rights of self-expression are media corporations. Simultaneously, the idea of mandating direct public access to the dominant commercial media, or of imposing requirements on the commercial media to satisfy the public's right to hear opposing views on matters of public importance, is invalidated. What we discover is that government can function to privi-

lege certain voices, whether by design or by default, through various means which include decisions *not* to intervene and through the introduction of policy voids by the “deregulation” of entrenched industries (Mosco 1999). Media deregulation has not functioned to “free” the marketplace of ideas from the shackles of government control. More accurately, it has removed formal guarantees for moderating the subjective control of the media by a homogeneous elite (e.g., Rowland and Tracey 1990; Aufderheide 1991). Thus, the interpenetration of public and private control at the national level is visibly illustrated.

Jansen (1988) notes that the gradual movement from the entrepreneurial capitalism of early America to corporate capitalism today corresponds with a parallel shift from direct, governmental censorship to “nongovernmental” or private censorship in the present. Regardless of the scale of their operations, these “market censors” work outside the domains of law because corporate censorship is defined as a *private* matter. From many corners of society—religious and secular, left and right, white and non-white, male and female, gay and heterosexual—the organized ability to pressure advertisers, and the resulting demands placed by advertisers on the media, have led not only to the emergence of extra-legal censorship but also serve as evidence of legitimate concerns that the media have become increasingly reticent on politically controversial matters. With the powers of private censorship, corporations are able to control a large measure of what will enter the marketplace of ideas on the basis of what will be least offensive, and thus will contribute to the greatest profitability. Due to economic self-interest, the media’s potential to foster lively public discourse is muted.

Although the smoking gun of advertiser pressure to influence the content of newspaper publishers or television networks is difficult to observe, there is the occasional exemplary event sufficient to “educate” editors and programmers about how to avoid committing future offenses (e.g., Montgomery 1986, 1989; Turow 1984). The economic power of citizens groups over the media is feared by the media and it is a subject which the media tend not to publicize themselves, for that would provide an instructive lesson for other possible dissenters on how to follow suit. But the real problem lies deeper than whether activist success is made public. Like the power shared between the media and the state, the power which links advertisers and the media is largely invisible, which helps to render transparent the commercial imperatives of ostensibly “public” expression. Of particular concern is the nature of the groups able to exert the most influence. Influential citizens groups must have sufficient political, economic, or cultural resources to threaten an advertiser with negative publicity, boycotts, or even the prospect of government intervention, which suggests that such groups are privileged in the first place when compared with a great many other groups who find particular news or entertainment content to be misleading, offensive, harmful, or unrepresentative. The sizeable homeless population, for example, does not

pose much of a threat, despite their needs for representation. Nor do a number of ethnic minorities. Under these circumstances, access becomes a matter of wealth, not representativeness. Those able to secure access at the national level are then able to share in brokering the terms of national discourse.

Alternatives to a Nationalist Public Sphere

What are the alternatives to the progressive erosion of what few limited opportunities existed for maintaining a broad base of public participation in steering the national media towards greater representativeness? Clearly, we can not afford the luxury of simply bidding farewell to bygone days of public service accountability. But the compelling cases for stemming and reversing eroded principles for fair representation in the broadcast industries ought to be supplemented by attention to greater direct participation through other means. Along with the vitally important goals of achieving greater representation must exist the goals of stimulating and invigorating discourses which may be irrelevant or inappropriate in a common national discourse. To say that such subaltern discourses are not appropriate to a common national discourse does not make the vigor of the former any less vital to the health of a democratic society. In rethinking the public sphere, if communications media are to be cast anew so that not only representation but also greater direct participation is possible, then the promises of alternative media must also be more fully realized. Put simply, the alternatives to a national media—the small scale media serving local groups, minorities, new social movements at the national and global level, and other sources of common identity—potentially represent more than a marginalized or ghettoized sideshow and diversion from the central business of national and global culture and politics (e.g., Armstrong 1981; Downing 1984; Waugh 1984; Lazere 1987).

Among the unique characteristics of politically motivated alternative media is that they articulate unrepresented or under-represented needs. Many of the media producers committed to giving voice to these subaltern discourses openly acknowledge that they have axes to grind, that they are *advocates*. They generally do not hide the difference between the subjectivity of their points of view and the questionable claims to universal representativeness which often sustain the power of the dominant media, for they generally hold the latter in doubt by virtue of the omissions they themselves uncover. To illustrate, this sense of doubt toward the mainstream, coupled with open rather than veiled advocacy, is historically a characteristic of the independent documentary film (more recently, video) tradition. The independent documentary in the U.S. has never commanded much national attention for reasons not simply related to lack of popularity. Unlike in the U.K., Canada, and other Western democracies, documentary expression never gained much legitimacy in American

movie theaters, with precious few exceptions, due in large part to lack of access not simply to the means of production but also to the means of distribution. Causes for this are difficult to identify in isolation, although the lack of state subsidization of documentary production and dissemination is one, if not the, major reason. While the Canadian Film Board has generously supplied funds to independent documentary producers, little of the sort has occurred in the United States. Indeed, there are illustrative cases where government-financed documentary production in the U.S. was later regretted by officials who spent the money because the results were not entirely flattering.⁹ In contrast to the Canadian experience, what little support has been provided here for independent film has discouraged "advocacy," a loaded term which enables funding decision makers to apply discretion arbitrarily. The point is to avoid controversy of many sorts, which is unfortunate since a key strength of the documentary form lies in its ability to integrate art and journalism to provide depth that is missing in other visual outlets for public affairs information.

In Thomas Waugh's (1984) introduction to a collection of essays about the "committed" documentary film, he offers this defense of advocacy: "By 'commitment' I mean, firstly, a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation. Secondly, I mean a specific political positioning: activism, or intervention in the process of change itself" (xiv). The point of Waugh's comments is not that "truth" is sacrificed to the power of advocacy, or that no argument is better than any other, although these certainly are feasible and inviting bases for the deceptive and intolerant dismissal of the insertion of excluded but vital discourses into the public sphere. Rather, Waugh's point is to suggest that truth through public expression is not readily knowable if we are to block out the sort of opposition and vitriol, as well as simply alternative interpretation, that the "committed documentary" offers. In documentarist Joris Ivens's (1969) autobiographical account of his career, he wrote of his experience in producing a film in 1937 entitled *The Spanish Earth*, which spoke out against fascism in Spain during its civil war. The film was criticized by major newspapers in the U.S. for being partisan, non-objective and non-artistic, and the voice-over narration read by Ernest Hemingway was labeled "propagandistic." This reception of the film is attributable in no small measure to the refusal on the part of a dominant ideological climate among private and public sector power brokers against supporting the anti-fascist "Loyalists," whose numbers included communists (Alexander 1981, 149-58). Major distributors kept *The Spanish Earth* out of movie theaters for a variety of stated reasons: "[I]t was too long, it was too short; the most honest people said frankly, it's too controversial" (Ivens 1969, 132).¹⁰ In Ivens's account of the experience, he discusses his openly anti-fascist perspective in the film and defends it against equally partisan questions which were raised about the film's "objectivity" and the extent to which it portrays "truth":

I was often asked, why hadn't we gone to the other side, too, and made an *objective* film? My only answer was that a documentary film maker has to have an opinion on such vital issues as fascism or anti-fascism—he *has* to have feelings about these issues, if his work is to have any dramatic or emotional or art value. . . . I was surprised to find that many people automatically assumed that any *documentary* film would inevitably be *objective*. Perhaps the term is unsatisfactory, but for me the distinction between the words document and documentary is quite clear. Do we demand objectivity in the evidence presented at a trial? No, the only demand is that each piece of evidence be as full a subjective, truthful, honest presentation of the witness's attitude as an oath on the Bible can produce from him. (Ivens 1969, 136-37)

This illustration is not merely of historic interest for the purpose of self-congratulatory exclamations about how blatant censorship would not happen today because of how far we've come since 1937 in this country in our ability to tolerate dissenting voices. The documentary form has all but died in the movie theater. Public television, where independently produced documentaries are but a small part of the total programming, remains the only viable national outlet (Massing 1980; Barnouw 1983). While this outlet is valuable to those independent documentarists who manage to survive economically, the radical cuts in public subsidies during the Reagan years have tamed public television. Such are the means available for independent, alternative voices to reach a broad base of the American public through direct means.

Although alternative fora for public expression have never been absent, as the limited survival of the documentary and alternative print media suggest, their prospects arguably could be improved due to the proliferation of accessible small scale computer and video technology. Whether the use of emerging technologies for radical expression offers viable means of counterbalancing the impact of the mainstream media is a moot question, since there is no doubt that these options offer little in terms of competition for the bulk of the attention of the American public. Yet, in the name of pluralism and equality, it is imperative that they be explored and developed more fully by a wider range of political voices than are in command of our national politics. To this end, involvement is required not only to make effective and democratic use of the emerging technologies, but also to participate in the politics of their further development. Refusal to participate in arenas where major decisions are made about the nature and structure of emerging systems of individual, group, and mass communication may seem like the moral high road against "reformist" politics, but it also is a means to self-exile. Irving Howe (1985) has noted that the American left historically has lacked the unity to combine its roles of moral protest and political reform, and it has only been in extreme circumstances—as in the period when abolitionism flourished and during the height of protest against the protracted Vietnam war—that the two have come together effectively. Despite that past, Howe convincingly argues that no sustained socialist movement "if it is to maintain the integrity of its

persuasions, can forgo some effort to be both the voice of protest and the agency of reform”:

It's not a matter of choosing between the roles of moral witness and political actor. It's a matter of finding ways through which to link properly the utopian moralism of the protester with the political realism of the activist; to ensure that the voice of high rectitude will reinforce and give breadth to the daily murmur of the reformer; to adapt to the realities of the American political system without succumbing to a small-souled pragmatism or a hermetic moralism. (Howe 1985, 143-44)

Today, there is little public attempt to politicize the nature of elite control over technology development or to push for alternative possibilities for the future use of new systems for communication. This is unfortunate, since there are examples of creative and innovative efforts which, if cultivated further, could be used to articulate and respond to the needs of a broader cross-section of the U.S. population. Perhaps, through the violence of idealist abstraction, such efforts can be dismissed as co-opted or reformist, but a categorical refusal to enter into the fray of institutional politics is a serious error. The right suffers from no similar infirmities as it has proven over the past several years through its deployment of every kind of new communications medium in its political ascent and present dominance over public institutions. During the Gulf War, the mainstream media depicted the messages of peace activists as anachronistic. Meanwhile, pro-war activists rallied behind the policy makers with a much more sophisticated and well-coordinated public offensive based on the “common sense” of militant nationalistic fervor about what’s best for America (thus, T-shirts emblazoned with Old Glory and the belligerent phrase “Try burning this one, asshole!”). Perhaps what would have been more valuable for the opposition was greater ability to deploy the same modern tools of mobilization: computer networks, target marketing, direct mail, public relations, spin wizardry, etc. (e.g., Harvey 1991), not only at the height of crisis but as a means of maintaining alternative, independent flows of information and opinion. It is fruitless to dismiss the new machines as tools of the oppressor, for any would-be oppressor will happily accept the invitation to influence opinion unopposed.

The purpose of this argument is not simply to offer unqualified and uncritical support for what exists of a left political tradition, but rather it is to suggest that there is a vacuum of national leadership which speaks on behalf of a broader set of needs. This seems to result at least in part from the fact that national media have tended to neglect the needs of citizens in a post-welfare state except to the extent that those needs can be funnelled into the discourse of crises of “national unity.” In the name of representation, there is infinite room for improvement by the national media. In the name of participation, there is considerable room for seizing more immediately available means of political discourse and expression.

Conclusion

The primary concern above is whether the perspective which the increasingly concentrated, vertically integrated, and commercially owned national media can stand alone in providing the primary cache of cultural symbols from which American identities are drawn. National identity is one among *many* identities which Americans should take equal comfort in maintaining. Unfortunately, in the absence of well-developed alternatives for public expression, the contemporary system of mass communication, particularly television, threatens to extinguish other identities besides nationalism, and in doing so offers a shallow notion of patriotism.

While it would be facile to claim that the fueling of extreme nationalism is the *intent* of the national media, it would be prudent to recognize the systemic limitations on the national media to speak to the diverse cultural and political identities of Americans. The progressive privatization of increasingly centralized public spaces for political and cultural discourse contributes to the gradual dispossession of diverse identities which constitute an American tapestry and which make this country's *mythology* an inspiration for many people in the world. It is not likely that the national media—the dominant force in the American public sphere—can ever adequately mirror that diversity. We should at least see to it that the ideas of individual liberty, pluralism and equality are not jettisoned by a failure to hold the national media accountable or by a failure to pursue alternatives.

University of Colorado at Boulder & Purdue University

NOTES

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1. Williams's insight into the problematic notion of the idea of "community" is sustained in a number of his works (e.g., Williams 1979; 1983). See Calabrese (1991) for an explanation of the significance of Williams's treatment of this concept in the selling of the information age.

2. Such instrumentalism is present, however, as evidenced by the efforts of influential conservative journalists such as George Will and William F. Buckley (Burner and West 1988).

3. See also Bobbio (1987). In this essay, Bobbio notes that one of the reasons for the asserted value of democracy over the absolute state was to rid the state of *arcana imperii*, "[t]he secret and hidden deliberations or resolutions of those who hold power in the state" (86).

4. The national media of the U.S., particularly television, did little to pose a challenge to this free hand. Patrick O'Heffernan (1991, 1990) provides a useful illustration of the various means by which near-total manipulation of U.S. television coverage of the war was a major strategic focus of the White House and the Pentagon, and he discusses potentially effective means of future resistance to such

manipulation by national and international news organizations. However, they are solutions which rest ultimately on the assumption that nationalism will weaken. As O'Heffernan (1991) rightly suggests, we should applaud the present emergence of transnational, non-U.S. news organizations since they would be less likely to fear the vengeful regulatory wrath of a federal administration whose war-making efforts might be scorned by critical scrutiny before American voters. We should not forget, however, that the U.S. technological war-making capacity is unsurpassed in the world. This *national* arsenal depends on its corollary, a *national* media system in reserve to control voter access to knowledge not only about military strategy but about the results of military actions.

5. This idea is summed up well and taken further in an observation by Laclau and Mouffe (1985): "Although we can affirm . . . that wherever there is power there is resistance, it must also be recognized that the forms of resistance may be extremely varied. Only in certain cases do these forms of resistance take on a political character and become struggles directed towards putting an end to relations of subordination as such" (152-53).

6. According to Alan Cawson's (1991) entry in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, "corporatism" referred initially to an inter-war phenomenon in fascist states in which social control was steered closely by organizations created and licensed by the state. Contemporary analyses of "liberal corporatism" in advanced capitalist societies emphasize "the extent to which formally private bodies perform public tasks" (104). Three distinguishing features are the monopoly role of corporatist bodies, the fusion of representative roles and implementation, and the role of the state in licensing monopoly representation and co-determining policy. Corporatism is typified by tripartite negotiation among the state, capital, and labor, and aims at the subordination of the working class (see also Held 1987, 214-20). Although corporatism in the U.S. is seen as weaker than in other capitalist states, the analyses which arrive at this conclusion are mostly from the 1970s and early 1980s. Given the accelerating trend of industrial concentration and centralization, coupled with increasing state coordination and negotiation with other countries and trading blocs on behalf of American capital's access to their markets, it would appear that the U.S. movement towards corporatism has accelerated.

7. See Friedman (1991) for an apt illustration of the gap between the symbolic appeal of American liberty versus the perception of its transferability.

8. The paper, entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," was read before the American Historical Association in 1883. See also Frederick J. Turner (1920). Daniel Boorstin (1965) sees the tendencies of uncritical deployment of the Turner thesis in historical writing as "symptomatic of the power of professional orthodoxy." His characterization of the problematic use of the thesis as "a dogma to be applied rather than a hypothesis to be tested" runs counter to his own view of it as a "starting point for investigation" (435).

9. This can be seen in the case of the film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, directed by Pare Lorentz in 1936 and financed in part by the U.S. government's Resettlement Administration. The film is critical of U.S. agricultural policy which preceded the Dust Bowl drought and the Great Depression. According to Erik Barnouw (1983, 117-19) the film was controversial not only for its challenges to government, but also because of Hollywood opposition to "socialist" competition from government-financed films. The film industry united against distributing the film, although a maverick independent distributor capitalized on the publicity from attempted censorship and managed to book it in three thousand theaters. The film was an artistic and, by documentary standards, commercial success.

10. As William Alexander (1981) notes, despite the barriers, the film had a long run at the Fifty-Fifth Street Playhouse in New York, followed by bookings in over four hundred theaters in about sixty American cities, as well as nontheatrical

showings to many organizations. Profits from the film went to assisting the Loyalists (57).

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