

MYTH #12: The Mass Media Provides Unbiased Economic Reporting

“Inform, educate, distract” – slogan of a TV channel in Niger

“The goal [of advertising] is to undermine markets by creating uninformed consumers who will make irrational choices and the business world spends huge efforts on that.”
– Noam Chomsky¹

“The engines of mass communication, in their highest state of development, assail the eyes and ears of the community on behalf of more beverages but not of more schools.”
– John Kenneth Galbraith²



Promoting the Corporate Agenda

Imagine for a moment that you are the CEO of a major corporation. You have a legal obligation to give your shareholders a good return. You have a personal motivation to pay yourself a high salary. By banking most of your profits overseas, you save on taxes and thus enjoy higher profits. Perhaps it is not all about the money, because you also enjoy a pleasant sensation of power. Mixed with your enjoyment is concern about possible threats to your position and to the status and profits of your company. There is competition from similar companies. There is the possibility that government regulations will become stricter. Moreover, there is the nagging thought that governments might try, especially in times of economic hardship, to raise corporate and personal taxes and to close some of the loopholes and evasion tactics that, so far, have kept your taxes low.

You are uncomfortably aware that a number of different groups are campaigning for tax reform and other policies to rein in corporate profits and power. You realize that politicians would be under a lot of pressure to pass such policies if public support were sufficiently mobilized. You thus need to ensure not only that policy-makers are on your side, but also that the public does *not* support such policies, even though it is the public which suffers from government budget shortfalls (to which your tax avoidance contributes).

What should you do? You could rely on the high levels of apathy and lethargy that exist within the public. People are busy with their own problems, including struggling to survive on the minimal wages that you pay. However, a rather worrisome momentum became evident during the Occupy movement. Such bubbles of enthusiasm and the sustained efforts of a few NGOs to increase attention on the problems of growing income inequality are cause for concern. Given the high stakes, it is better not to be too complacent. It is easy to ensure that politicians remain beholden to you and will thus pursue your agenda: campaign donations and other acts of generosity will do the trick. In the face of a determined public, it will not be enough just to pay off politicians. You also have to get the public on your side. You want to make sure that the average person believes that the concen-

tration of wealth in the hands of a few corporations and people, rather than impoverishing others, actually benefits the economy and all those who cannot pay the rent or find a job.

It is no secret that the easiest way to influence public opinion is through the media. Various options are available, and, to cover all your bases, you may well choose to make use of all of them. It will cost a lot of money but, after all, you can simultaneously advertise your company, your products, and the joy of consumerism (and, if done properly, get tax breaks for doing so). There is significant overlap between promoting the message that corporations are everyone's best friend and the message that people need to buy more of your products...and it is still a lot cheaper to use the media to get your message across than to pay taxes.

Strategy to get Average Person on board #1: Use direct and indirect advertising to convince people how wonderful your company is or how unfairly it is being attacked. Advertising can be for a generic product (soft drinks), a specific company's product (Coke), or the company itself (Coca-Cola Company). The amounts spent on advertising are significant: in the United States in 2013 alone, they amount to \$42.8 billion on the Internet, \$40.1 billion on broadcast TV, \$34.4 billion on cable TV, \$18 billion in newspapers, \$16.7 billion on the radio, and \$13.4 billion in magazines, for a total of more than \$165 billion.³ Plenty of opportunity thus exists to avail the media to improve your corporate self-image.ⁱ

Some ads specifically seek to promote a corporate image: by advertising its good corporate behaviour, a company is often able to counter complaints made against it. Catchy slogans help when regularly repeated on TV and through other media. How can one not like General Electric after repeatedly hearing its jingle: "We bring good things to living, we bring good things to life"? In the days before tobacco advertising was banned, British American Tobacco in Bangladesh regularly took out half-page, full-colour ads to advertise its 'socially responsible' programs, such as planting trees and telling children not to smoke.ⁱⁱ Walmart regularly runs TV

ⁱ The ads do not of course always succeed. Many women would take exception to the overtly sexist advertising that is used to promote beer, cigarettes, and other products. The sexualisation of women (and girls), the promotion of unachievable body image, and the glamorisation of violence are common in advertising of just about every product available, as Jean Kilbourne shows in her lecture "The Naked Truth." Kilbourne's lectures are listed here: <http://www.jeankilbourne.com/lectures>; some of her talks are also available on the Internet, e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy8yLaoWybk>

ⁱⁱ There is extensive literature showing that tobacco industry campaigns to convince youth not to smoke are likely to have the opposite effect; that is, they make young people more interested in smoking. One useful source on this is www.ash.org.uk/current-policy-issues/youth-smoking

spots to boost its corporate image in an attempt to counter some of the many complaints people have about the mammoth company. Shell, BP, and other oil companies have all used TV ads to talk about their environmental commitments. McDonalds advertises its “Ronald McDonald House Charities” which provide homes for families to stay in while their children receive medical treatment, comfortable places to relax within hospitals, a mobile clinic (which is itself a roaming ad), grants to improve access to health care, and college scholarships.⁴ (You can afford a lot of generosity when you make a ton of money and pay paltry salaries.)

Televised news and entertainment programs, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet are all intensely commercial. Their real purpose is not to inform, educate, or entertain us, but rather to make money.ⁱⁱⁱ Broadcasters and publishers make money by capturing an audience that has certain demographic qualities sought by advertisers and then selling that audience to those advertisers. Direct advertising is clearly labelled as such, with the sponsor duly noted. Indirect advertising, on the other hand, is embedded in a TV, radio or other type of program and the sponsor is not necessarily obvious. Women’s magazines, for example, print articles that promote specific beauty products; sports magazines run articles about physique-enhancing drink powders. TV programs and movies show people consuming or using specific products or engaging in specific behaviours; some even incorporate more detailed, pro-corporate messages into their plots. In some cases, it is difficult or impossible to know who has sponsored the advertisement. Editorials can also be subtle advertisements for products or corporations, giving rise to the term ‘advertorials.’⁵

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***Distraction...with a message:** An episode of a popular American TV program about an overweight couple focused on their growing debt. The husband, a policeman, was concerned about his unemployed wife’s tendency to go on shopping sprees. He suggested various ways to curb their spending, including by drinking tap rather than bottled water. As he poured a glass from the tap, the water came out cloudy. Later, his wife explained that when she is upset, shopping makes her feel better, and he realized that his devotion to his wife required him to encourage her habit. The bills could wait.*

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ⁱⁱⁱ The situation is slightly more complicated than this. Some media moguls use the media to influence politicians and the public, which in turn increases their profits; in this case, they may be less concerned about selling ads and more concerned about the corporate and political messages that they put forth in their programming and articles. And, of course, there are less commercial or non-commercial alternative media options.

I once heard a brief radio segment about an international gathering of heads of state during which the leader of Spain said to Hugo Chávez, “Cállate” (shut up). Someone proceeded to make a ring tone from the Spanish leader’s words and made a fortune selling the ringtone. (The program did not mention what Chávez had said to elicit that response.) I paused to reflect on what exactly could be newsworthy in that story, then realized that any excuse to put Chávez down is welcome, as is any chance to promote a company’s new product.

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Strategy to get Average Person on board #2: Influence news reporting. It is easy to identify the ads aired during the news, and there are lots of them: in the United States, ads take up thirty percent of local TV news time.⁶ In addition to all the clearly identified ads, there are prepared news segments that companies give to TV stations to air. Likewise, companies pay newspapers and magazines to print articles or information. Journalists are busy and most TV stations and newspapers are understaffed, so they will happily accept pre-packaged ‘news.’ Again, these are sometimes easy to spot (a ‘news’ article about a great new product or a corporate event)...but other times they are not. In either case, they are pervasive in the United States and internationally. An article in *The New York Times* about such pre-packaged news quotes the sales pitch of a video news release company called TVA productions: “No TV news organization has the resources in labor, time or funds to cover every worthy story,” TVA tells its potential clients, adding “90 percent of TV newsrooms now rely on video news releases.”⁷

Both governments and corporations purchase time in the media under the cover of ‘news reporting’ without acknowledging their sponsorship. According to the *New York Times* article on the topic,

Under the [second] Bush administration, the federal government has aggressively used a well-established tool of public relations: the prepackaged, ready-to-serve news report that major corporations have long distributed to TV stations to pitch everything from headache remedies to auto insurance. In all, at least 20 federal agencies, including the Defense Department and the Census Bureau, have made and distributed hundreds of television news segments in the past four years...Many were subsequently broadcast on local stations across the country without any acknowledgement of the government’s role in their production.⁸

And why not? Local news stations are spared the expense and trouble of doing their own reporting; public relations firms make millions of dollars on the contracts; and networks collect fees from government agencies and from affiliates. Moreover, governments and corporations get their propaganda out, unfiltered, “delivered in the guise of traditional reporting.”⁹ So is it news or is it corporate messaging? Hard to know.

Strategy to get Average Person on board #3: Use the media to spread the idea that consumption is our greatest goal, that corporations and the wealthy are our greatest friends, and that the poor and racial minorities are violent criminals. Messages telling the public that consumption means happiness are incorporated throughout the media. The occasional counter-view is lost in the sea of messages that, in John Kenneth Galbraith's words, tell us that the "greatest source of pleasure, the highest measure of human achievement" and "the foundation of human happiness" is consumption.¹⁰ While consumption is a goal in itself for corporations, it also links to the feel-good message that corporations spread about themselves. This includes the use of movies such as *Sex in the City* and *The Princess Diaries*^{iv} to show that there is no greater happiness than shopping. It includes TV programs like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (later replaced by *Social* and a whole host of reality TV shows) which show that there is nothing better than to be fabulously rich. The goal is to cultivate a sensation of envy for the rich that makes it less likely that people will blame the rich for their own less enviable financial position. The message is so pervasive in media that people may not even consciously notice it.

It should not be surprising that Hollywood helps here, as it costs a lot of money to produce a movie. Corporations insert their advertising, both of specific brand names and of general items, into movies, as well as the overall messages about the glamour and joy of consumption. To give a few (somewhat outdated) examples, *Titanic* glamorized all sorts of tobacco use and suggested that it is cool to blow smoke into other people's faces, *Sleepless in Seattle* featured a huge Coca-Cola billboard, and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* made its pitch for Reese's Pieces. Movies that are more recent promote, among other things, bottled water, SUVs, and Apple computers. *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* equated cycling with childhood: the hero only learned to drive 'a manly vehicle' (e.g. a car) after he finally had achieved adulthood by losing his virginity.

Criminals on TV and in movies are not exclusively poor, Hispanic, or black – but

^{iv} This was adapted from a book I would not normally read, but I happened to, before passing on to a teenage girl in Sri Lanka. What particularly horrified me was not just the book's glamorization of extreme wealth but also the way that it portrayed the head of the imaginary state of Genovia: despite being absurdly wealthy, he is able to defend his wealth because he "does so much for the population." The thoughtful reader might argue that the presence of billionaires in actual countries does not preclude extreme poverty, but then, the target of the book is not thoughtful readers.

they most often are. Noam Chomsky refers to

the long-term effort to destroy the institutional basis for social support systems, to eliminate programs such as Social Security that are based on the conception that people have to have some concern for one another. The idea that we should feel sympathy and solidarity, that we should care whether the disabled widow across town is able to eat, has to be driven from our minds. That is a large part of the domestic agenda, quite apart from just shifting wealth and power toward ever-narrower sectors. And the way to achieve that – since people aren't going to accept it otherwise – is to make people afraid.¹¹

Certainly if one goal of TV programming is to make people afraid, and specifically to make them afraid of those on the receiving end of various forms of government support, then any number of programs effectively do just that.

Strategy to get Average Person on board #4: Buy media outlets (or become the subsidiary of a company that owns one). The fewer the number of corporations that own the media, the less risk there is of alternative viewpoints being aired. According to the Media Reform Information Center,

In 1983, 50 corporations controlled the vast majority of all news media in the U.S. At the time, Ben Bagdikian was called 'alarmist' for pointing this out in his book, *The Media Monopoly*. ... In 2004, Bagdikian's revised and expanded book, *The New Media Monopoly*, shows that only 5 huge corporations – Time Warner, Disney, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann of Germany, and Viacom (formerly CBS) – now control most of the media industry in the U.S. General Electric's NBC is a close sixth.¹²

Just one example of the result: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a trade treaty that is being widely contested by NGOs because it would limit the ability of signatory governments to protect public health, local industry, and the environment; the TV news virtually ignores the treaty.¹³ The corporate owners of TV channels could earn a lot of money if the TPP is approved, since the trade treaty would expand the rights of corporations and reduce those of governments seeking to regulate or control them. With just a few corporations owning most of the media, a media blackout is easy to achieve.

The situation may be better in other countries. Where government-owned media are promoting the propaganda, it is more easily recognizable. There is, for example, nothing subtle in Vietnam about the loudspeakers telling people at seven a.m. what they are supposed to do, if not to think. In many countries, certain newspapers have clear ties to different political parties and/or political viewpoints; competing political parties may also lead to a broader spectrum of views. Nevertheless, American influence on news is universal, given the tendency of news houses to pick up articles published in the United States. It becomes more and

more difficult to find progressive viewpoints in mainstream media anywhere in the world.

Media as a distraction

Now wait just a moment. Even if you, the corporate executive eager to boost your corporate image and to avoid taxes and regulations, are successful at using the media, can the Average Person not fight back? She still maintains the power of independent thought. She can still say, "Just because Shell tells me it cares deeply about the environment doesn't mean that I have to believe it. And that business about shopping? It's a stressful activity that just increases my credit card debt. I'd rather go for a bike ride with my friends! And if I have to pay thirty-five percent of my income in taxes, why on earth shouldn't corporations and the wealthy pay at least as much?"

Fortunately, the media is your friend in another way. Most media does not encourage thinking. On the contrary, it encourages people to sit back and let someone else think for them. Some TV programming is of course thoughtful and opens up questions; much more of it discourages questioning, either through extreme silliness or by providing viewers with the answers. TV news stories tend to make clear who the 'good' and 'bad' guys are and inform us how we should view the issues. While people appreciate the 'free' entertainment that TV offers, such passive recreation comes at a high price: it discourages people from being creative thinkers and from solving problems.^v The media thus represents a powerful tool through which corporations can engage in mass brainwashing. Watching television and using the Internet are also, for many, highly distracting pursuits that take hours in the day away from the possibility of more mindful pursuits, such as reading a book about the economics of wellbeing, pursuing information from alternative media, or organizing a group of neighbours to discuss how to respond to local budget cuts. According to Noam Chomsky, advertising is a form of "off-job control" which "means turning people into robots in every part of their lives by inducing a 'philosophy of futility,' focusing people on 'the superficial things of life,

^v A moment of thought reveals the oddity of people spending money to purchase a TV set in order to allow advertisers to broadcast messages right into their homes. Big Brother does not need to force his way in, in Orwellian fashion; the modern family invites him. In contrast to Orwell's nightmarish view, Big Brother is not Government but the Corporation. For more on this, see Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). As new forms of media emerge, advertisers adapt, for instance with the constant stream of ads and mindless distractions on the Internet and smart phones that make it clear what we should (and what we should not) value. Fashion, yes; obsession with the stars, yes; helping the poor...not so much.

like fashionable consumption.” This allows “the people who are supposed to run the show [to] do so without any interference from the mass of the population, who have no business in the public arena.”¹⁴

Hint: Look for corporate influence in the media. In addition to direct ads, what messages do they promote in terms of how we should look at the wealthy and the poor, the role of corporations in our society, and the pleasures of consumerism versus non-materialistic pursuits?

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Utter nonsense masquerading as news is common, palatable, and even enjoyable. I have seen newspapers in Mumbai (Bombay) that *only* write about Bollywood stars. The papers in Bangkok are better, but often the news section is slim compared to the thick sections about business, arts, entertainment, and gossip. When I go on the Internet, I find informative articles about the best- and worst-dressed Hollywood actresses at a recent event. Television coverage of the British royal family is extensive while coverage of serious issues is often absent. Yes, there is good stuff among the rubbish, but the overwhelming majority is nonsense or mainstream propaganda...and advertising supplies the corporate message even in the better TV programming.

Is it news or is it thought control?

In addition to producing rubbish and delivering corporate (and sometimes government) propaganda masquerading as news, the media also regularly ‘educates’ the public about political and economic issues. That ‘education’ typically comes with a heavy bias towards the conservative, mainstream economic view. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) regularly reports on conservative biases in American media, including in major newspapers such as *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *LA Times*. For example, according to FAIR, massive protests against World Bank and IMF policies led to five op-eds in *The New York Times*, all critical of the protests.¹⁵ Both *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* mainly cheered on the Iraq War and downplayed any information suggesting it was unjustified, placing their pro-war pieces on the front page and burying deep inside the paper suggestions that evidence of weapons of mass destruction did not exist.¹⁶ As the editors of *The New York Times* later admitted,

...we have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged. Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged – or failed to emerge.¹⁷

While the apology is appreciated, it should also serve as a useful reminder that even the best of the media often fail us in terms of providing the information that is needed to decipher the world and to make informed decisions.

The media decides who it labels as a 'terrorist' or 'rebel' instead of as an outspoken opponent of a corrupt regime. Decades ago, the labelling of a protester as a terrorist was less common, but still prevalent enough for the former president of Argentina, General Jorge R. Videla, to define terrorists thus: "a terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilizations."¹⁸ Post 9/11, the convenient label 'terrorist' can now be applied even more readily to anyone fighting for land reform or against mining or oil drilling on their native land or for more equitable practices or for workers' rights or against privatization of government services or...just about anything else that questions mainstream economics and politics. When one hears and sees it enough in the mainstream media, it becomes difficult to remember to question it. Corporation: good guy. Indigenous man resisting corporation: bad guy.

The media also distorts issues, not only in terms of what it says but also in what it ignores. An American newspaper article about dogs returning from the war in Iraq with post-traumatic stress disorder was interesting but, as with the common articles about returning soldiers being reunited with their families, did not address why America went to war in Iraq or the effect of the war on Iraqis. In general, articles about war focus on battles, not on causes or effects. An article about a gunman firing inside a school focuses on how easily the shooter entered the school, not on the importance of making it more difficult to obtain a weapon.

Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning leaked government 'secrets' about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and about the way that corporations mistreat the world's poor. The media has focused on whether she will be found guilty, not on the content of the leaks. Stories about how the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is conducting a months-long bombing campaign of major cities to 'liberate' a country tend not to mention what life must be like for the residents of those cities. An article about how to attract more foreign direct investment into a country assumes that it is a good thing, and ignores the fact that the resulting mine or oil well will displace thousands and likely create very few local jobs. A story about GDP growth assumes that GDP tells us something useful.

The Internet can be better...or not. As with the rest of media, the Internet is subject to corporate influence. Again, it takes a bit of work to find the genuinely worthwhile, and too often, it is buried under piles of corporate messages and mindless diversion. Coverage of the contribution of fast food to obesity and the potential of

holding companies liable is peppered with such phrases as “undermine personal responsibility,” “jeopardize consumer choice,” and “will turn all Americans into victims incapable of bearing responsibility for their personal choices.”¹⁹ An entire website is devoted to debunking the “highly questionable” reports put out by one nutrition advocacy group, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).²⁰ The stories on the site have colourful titles such as “CSPI Nuts Prefer Kids Fast than Eat Fast Food” and “CSPI Applauds Taking Toys from Kids.” The website also claims that CSPI “routinely uses scare tactics justified by ‘junk science’ and media theatrics as part of their ceaseless campaign for government regulation of your personal food choices.”^{vi} Who might be funding these attacks on CSPI? Fast food companies can certainly afford to promote their image and attack their attackers; McDonalds alone posted \$4.3 billion in profits on sales of \$23.5 billion in 2008.²¹ According to most media outlets, it would be a crime to interfere with ‘consumer choice’ or with such sizeable corporate profits. The image of the strong independent consumer victimized by the nanny state (with the innocent corporation sheltered in the background) is common, and, thanks to pervasive corporate messages, one need not be a paid corporate mouthpiece to repeat those messages. On the other hand, information not funded by corporations is probably easier to access on the Internet than via other media. It often involves a bit of digging, as the first sites that appear are likely to have paid money in order to move up on a search engine. It also involves sorting through the assorted crazies. Nevertheless, it is plentiful and some of it is highly valuable.

Corporatocracy’s biggest ally

The role of TV (not simply advertising but programming itself) is, in the words of David Korten, “not simply to sell products and strengthen the consumer culture...but to create a political culture that equates the corporate interest with the human interest in the public mind.”²² There is significant overlap between the corporate interest and the interests of the wealthy. The media succeeds in bridging the gap between those elite interests and everyone else’s. Rather than resent the wealthy, most people wish to emulate them. Outrageous wealth no longer seems so outrageous when we regularly read about billionaires and the places they frequent. One can find respectable media coverage of heroes: people working to improve the conditions of vulnerable populations or to preserve an endangered species or prevent destruction of a special habitat. (Media coverage, especially on

^{vi} The term ‘choice’ has particular resonance with those who have worked on tobacco control. The tobacco companies love talking about consumer choice, as if government regulations to inform consumers about harmful products, and policies to counter or reduce billions of dollars of advertising, would somehow inhibit people’s ability to decide what they want.

TV, of those fighting corporations is probably much harder to find.) But such praise hardly holds a candle to the outpourings of attention and adulation poured on the rich, simply for being rich. It is not difficult to see which lifestyle we are supposed to imitate and whose interests we should seek to defend.

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One dull day I watched a reality show in which two people with the same name switch places. One is a Texan working for his mother's lawn care business; the other is a famous Hollywood actor. They each find the other's lifestyle extremely strenuous: the actor is exhausted after a day of mowing lawns, while the landscaper is worn out from the intense gym workout and numerous meetings. The actor spends his first couple of nights tossing and turning on an uncomfortable bed in a cramped and unattractive home, while the landscaper is awed by the luxury of the actor's massive and well-equipped home. At one point, the landscaper tells the camera, in great earnestness, "He works hard; he deserves all this!" while the actor shows his generosity by giving the struggling Texans, who are in danger of losing their business because they lack updated equipment, three new riding mowers. The moral of this episode appears to be that the actor deserves all of his wealth and luxury for working so hard at looking and sounding good, while the landscaper, who works equally hard, deserves his poverty and should thank his lucky stars the actor made a charitable gesture in his direction.

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It does work. Whatever her actual financial status, the average American is surprisingly eager to defend the interests of the wealthy. When twenty percent of Americans believe they will become millionaires in the next ten years (even though only about five percent currently are), they do not push for higher taxes on the rich.²³ When Americans believe that giant corporations deliver wonderful products, are a great source of jobs, and are essential to their nation, they won't be too concerned about corporate tax evasion (if they are even aware that it happens). When Americans believe that government regulations stifle personal freedom and prevent corporations from making the profits that will enrich citizens, they will not push for more regulations. Unfortunately, what is true for America is true, to a greater or lesser degree, in many other countries as well.

But the media sometimes attacks corporations!

With all the corporate influence, how then does it happen that the conventional press does sometimes publish a story attacking a corporation? I often wonder why there is any liberal reporting in the mainstream media at all. There are at least a couple of reasons for its presence: liberal reporting can create controversy which allows for more conservative responses; it gives companies an incentive to increase their advertising (to fend off negative reporting); and it maintains the

important façade of a free press, which is needed to reassure citizens of the world that they do in fact live in democracies, whatever the case may actually be.

When searching for information about the spectacular British Petroleum oil spill in April 2010, I found countless articles that referred to BP ‘accidentally’ spilling 2.5 million gallons of oil a day into the Gulf of Mexico. Many articles discussed potential ways to contain the spill, which was likely to cost billions of dollars. Harder to find in the media was any discussion of the cause of the spill, and more specifically, the extent of BP’s liability and how extensively the company had lobbied to avoid the sorts of safety procedures that could have prevented the spill in the first place. *The New York Times* did publish a more meaningful article pointing out BP’s liability.²⁴ In 2014, BP took out several full-page ads in the *Times* to argue that the settlement to which it agreed was unfair. Those two events (the anti-BP article and the full-page ads) may not be connected, but I know that in Bangladesh, newspapers sometimes deliberately run articles attacking a major company either to elicit higher advertising spending or to punish the company for withdrawing its ads.

Some exceptions aside, mainstream media is owned by major corporations and spends most of its energy pursuing the corporate agenda, directly or indirectly. It is up to those who wish to promote wellbeing to find ways to counter it.



Towards a Better Way: Controls on Advertising, Support for Independent Media, and Preserving the Internet

“Citizens of the democratic societies should undertake a course of intellectual self defense to protect themselves from manipulation and control, and to lay the basis for meaningful democracy.” – Noam Chomsky²⁵

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People’s assumptions and beliefs about economics are too often shaped by an uncritical acceptance of the myths that the media constantly feeds them. What is perhaps most sinister in all of this is that most people are unaware of the extent to which they are influenced by the implicit and explicit messages that the media promotes. As stated on advertising analyst Jean Kilbourne’s website, “Advertising is an over \$200 billion a year industry. We are each exposed to over 3000 ads a day. Yet, remarkably, most of us believe we are not influenced by advertising.”²⁶

Alas, even the few countries that have tried to escape from media’s influence are relenting; Bhutan introduced TV in 1999 and saw a rapid deterioration of its culture.²⁷ Myanmar has already opened its doors to the corporate world.²⁸ Only Cuba may still have virtually no advertising.²⁹ Even if people stopped watching

TV, the Internet would fill the gap. At an individual level, it is at least theoretically possible to be aware of the pervasiveness of media and alert to the messages that the media is spreading. In fact, the easiest way to avoid being influenced is to limit one's exposure to conventional media. Refuse to watch TV and try to avoid all the junk on the Internet. Be alert when reading the newspaper and balance the reporting with articles from independent media. Learn from experts on advertising like Jean Kilbourne; turn to Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) or Media Matters for information about the deceptiveness of conventional media and for alternative views. Listen to public or, if available, independent, community radio. Read books that go into issues in depth and that provide context and a logical development of arguments. Talk to others, especially to those who are not benefiting from the current economic regime.

However, it is unlikely that more than a small percentage of the population of any country will actively resist corporate media messaging. As long as people remain captivated by conventional media, it will be difficult to convince them to work for a world that is oriented more towards wellbeing and less towards consumption. Corporate control of the media is an enormous issue that will not easily be resolved, but there are various places to start. Given the enormous amount of media to which people are exposed, even small victories can have significant results and can lead to bigger ones. As people learn to resist corporate media in small ways, they can also learn to reduce its influence on their lives.

Campaigns for advertising restrictions should highlight the myriad ways that advertising infiltrates people's day-to-day lives. Activists could call for limits on the percentage of TV programming time that can show ads, for outright bans on advertising during children's TV programs, for restrictions on the amount of advertising allowed in newspapers, and for prohibitions against advertising for specific harmful products. There is no reason to accept a passive role or to being subjected to whatever advertising companies dream up. Even if the laws of a country are interpreted to defend the 'free speech' of corporations, no individual has an unlimited right to free speech. Bans are difficult to pass and implement, but they have succeeded in drastically curtailing the advertising of tobacco and infant formula. The easiest place to start is with advertising that clearly targets children. Research has found that children under the age of eight readily accept whatever they see in ads, consider the messages in ads accurate, truthful, and unbiased, and that a single exposure to an ad can lead a child to desire a product.³⁰ Sweden has banned all ads on children's prime time TV since 1991. The European Union is looking at the possibility of implementing a Europe-wide ban on or regulation of ads targeting children.³¹ Another approach is to allow advertising but to force those sponsoring the ads to pay as well for the running of an equal amount of

counter ads produced by non-industry groups.

A large and diverse network to campaign for advertising restrictions could bring together like-minded people with a wide background of interests and areas of expertise. Advertising is offensive not only because of the corporate messages that it promotes but because of its sexual depiction of women and pre-adolescents. *Ms. Magazine* tried to implement a policy that only allowed advertising that was not insulting or demeaning to women, and then realized that such a policy was impossible to implement. Instead, it banned ads altogether.³² It may thus be possible to recruit women's rights activists to join a coalition to put limits on commercial speech.

Activists can look at supporting or expanding existing independent media. Within a large network, there are usually people with ideas, creativity, and time who just need some support, encouragement, and guidance. Possibilities include starting or contributing to a local, independent newspaper; using social media; and starting or using community radio to spread ideas and information about the promotion of wellbeing and to question the goal of economic growth.

Groups that are lobbying to keep access to the Internet open provide another approach to addressing media. The international, open exchange of information threatens many interests, which in turn are keen to limit that access. Corporations would like to control the Internet so that commercial content is listed well before non-commercial, making it more difficult for people to gain access to information that is not put out by corporations. The Pew Research Internet Project looked at various potential threats to full ongoing public use of the Internet. The threats they identified include government control (through blocking, filtering, and other means), the use of the Internet for government or corporate surveillance of citizens, commercial pressures that limit the flow of information, and the risk of efforts to minimize excessive content leading to reduced availability of viewpoints. There was also concern about the use of only a single, major corporate search engine (such as Google) to look for information, which can easily reduce access to counter viewpoints.³³ It is also important, where possible, to utilize the mainstream media to spread messages that run counter to the doctrines of mainstream economics. Corporate control makes it difficult but not impossible to access mainstream media, and there are various strategies to increase one's access. Controversy can be profitable to media companies, and colourful protests make good news.³⁴

At the beginning of this discussion, I suggested that the reader imagine being a corporate executive defending himself from potential attacks, including by those eager to raise taxes on rich corporations and individuals. In that scenario, the

mainstream media is likely to be your close friend. Not all friendships last forever, nor, as the saying goes, is it possible to fool all of the people all of the time. People can learn to be active critics of media propaganda and to question what they see on the news and on other programming. People can learn to be alert to how the media portrays economic and other issues. People can seek out alternative sources that depict positive solutions to the problems of ever-growing inequality and an ever-worsening environment. People can also, to some degree, influence the media, ensuring better reporting of issues and events. The very wealthy have most of the money, but the public can successfully fight back with ideas.

Notes

¹ Noam Chomsky, lecture titled "The State-Corporate Complex: A Threat to Freedom and Survival," at the University of Toronto, 7 April 2011.

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³ Mark Berman, "Internet Ad Revenue Outpaced Broadcast TV Ad Revenue for the First Time," *The Washington Post*, 10 April 2014.

⁴ Ronald McDonald House Charities, "What We Do," <http://www.rmhc.org/what-we-do> accessed 20 August 2014.

⁵ See, for example, Anup Shah, "Media and Advertising," *Global Issues*, 4 March 2012. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/160/media-and-advertising>

⁶ "Advertising: Exposure & Industry Statistics," *Media Education Foundation Factsheet*, 2005.

⁷ David Barstow and Robin Stein, "Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged TV News," *The New York Times*, 13 March 2005.

⁸ Barstow and Stein, "Under Bush."

⁹ Barstow and Stein, "Under Bush."

¹⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics and the Public Purpose* (London: André Deutsch Ltd./Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).

¹¹ Noam Chomsky, *Imperial Ambitions: Conversations with Noam Chomsky on the Post-9/11 World* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

¹² Media Reform Information Center, <http://www.corporations.org/media/>, accessed 30 April 2014.

¹³ Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, "TPP TV Blackout: A Big Controversy That Isn't News—But Look What Is..." 24 April 2014, <http://fair.org/take-action/media-advisories/tpp-tv-blackout/>

¹⁴ Chomsky, *Imperial Ambitions*.

¹⁵ Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, "Media Distortion of World Bank/IMF Protests Starts Early," 11 April 2000, <http://fair.org/take-action/action-alerts/media-distortion-of-world-bankimf-protests-starts-early/>

¹⁶ Howard Kurtz, "The Post on WMDs: An Inside Story," *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2004.

¹⁷ The Editors, "The Times and Iraq," *The New York Times*, 26 May 2004.

¹⁸ Quoted in Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), citing London Times, 4 January 1978.

¹⁹ Competitive Enterprise Institute, "Fast Food Obesity Lawsuit Threatens Consumers, Rule of Law,"

<http://cei.org/news-releases/fast-food-obesity-lawsuit-threatens-consumers-rule-law>

²⁰ CSPIscam, www.cspiscam.com.

²¹ Monsters and Critics, http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/business/news/article_1455840.php/McDonald_s_posts_stronger_annual_profits_in_2008, accessed 26 May 2011.

²² David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, 2nd ed. (Connecticut and San Francisco: Kumarian and Berrett-Koehler, 2001).

²³ Laurie Kellman, "AP-CNBC Poll: Americans, Britons Less Optimistic about Becoming Millionaires than Australians," *AP-GFK*, 13 September 2011.

²⁴ Eric Lipton and John Broder, "Regulator Deferred to Oil Industry on Rig Safety," *The New York Times*, 7 May 2010. This case is also discussed at length in Joshua Holland, *The Fifteen Biggest Lies About the Economy and Everything Else the Right Doesn't Want You to Know About Taxes, Jobs, and Corporate America* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010).

²⁵ Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989).

²⁶ Jean Kilbourne, <http://www.jeankilbourne.com/lectures/> accessed 21 August 2014.

²⁷ Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, "Fast Forward into Trouble," *The Guardian*, 14 June 2003.

²⁸ I lived in Hanoi when the American trade embargo lifted and advertising poured in. The same process has started in Myanmar. See Anita Chang Beattie, "Myanmar Is Ripe to Be Marketing's New Frontier," *AdAge*, 17 June 2013.

²⁹ Eric Goldman, "Fantasize About A World Without Advertising? Try Cuba," *Forbes*, 22 August 2013.

³⁰ "Television Advertising Leads to Unhealthy Habits in Children, Says APA Task Force," *American Psychological Association*, 23 February 2004.

³¹ "Advertising: Exposure & Industry Statistics."

³² "Ms.'s policy is to only accept mission-driven or non-profit advertising, The magazine also rejected ads it found insulting or demeaning to women."

<http://www.answers.com/topic/ms-magazine#ixzz2ekbBetil>

³³ Pew Research Internet Project, "Net Threats,"

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/07/03/net-threats/>

³⁴ I have written a guide on how to access media at little or no cost: *Using Media and Research for Advocacy: Low Cost Ways to Increase Success*, available for free download at www.healthbridge.ca.