

We Need Government Funded Media

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What it would have cost us to publicly fund independent media that would have prevented the invasion of Iraq wouldn't amount, in a year, to what we spend on a month of occupying that country.

Diverting the cost of a month of war to a year of giving substance to our "freedom of the press" would mean that the last time someone asked you about the Teabaggers' genius in being smart enough to talk dumb enough to persuade everyone to be racists would, in fact, be the LAST time anyone would ask you how a creation of the corporate media manages to get coverage from the corporate media.

But what do I mean by government-funded independent media? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? Aren't we better off with a completely worthless and counterproductive corporate media system than with government-controlled media? Maybe, but I said publicly FUNDED, not government CONTROLLED. And the choice is between that sort of communications system or nothing. Corporate news rooms, journalism, and investigative reporting are dying out as surely as if a plague were spreading among reporters; and they were already dying out before the internet came onto the scene. We need to take a lesson from current European or early American history and begin treating the press as the public good that Jefferson and Madison considered it, or give up on the accountability imposed on government officials in the United States just a few decades ago.

"The Death and Life of American Journalism" by Robert McChesney and John Nichols will persuade anyone with basic reading skills of the above assertions. I highly recommend reading this book, and skipping only the first page of the introduction. The authors begin by quoting a mass-murderer who libels the blogosphere and opposes "opinion" to "serious" news. But they don't mean it any more than they mean to focus on early nineteenth century US history at the expense of examining more deeply the successes of European governments in the current era. That's just packaging for xenophobes.

The book is a tour de force, providing an extremely persuasive analysis of where our communications system is headed if left alone, and a terrific survey of ways in which we can rescue it from disaster. In short, the book shows us that corporate media is dying as a form of substantive political reporting. We need a different approach. But I'm not sure we don't also need to work within the existing and dying system, as we could have done decades ago but never have, as a step toward a long-term solution.

That is to say, in the wake of "Citizens United" we cannot possibly compete with corporate ad buys and shouldn't try. Civic groups and labor unions and concerned Americans should not give funding to any organization or political candidate who will pass a penny along to

the corporate media. Instead we should finally create our own media outlets with all of the money we waste on each election cycle.

We don't have to do so in the corporate manner. McChesney and Nichols point to other approaches, such as the L3C Low-Profit Limited Liability Company. A low profit would be more of a profit than Air America managed, and its funding and purpose would not subject it to the same risks. While we need long-term public investment in media, we need short-term private investment in the same to achieve the public understanding necessary to get us there.

Then we need the emergency and long-term steps McChesney and Nichols prescribe, including a return to better subsidized postal rates for print media, an expansion of AmeriCorps to include journalist training, an investment in high school media, and serious government funding of news reporters:

"If by 2020 we roughly doubled the number of full-time working journalists in the United States," McChesney and Nichols write, "to, say, 160,000, it would require a U.S. government subsidy of \$7.2 billion in 2009 dollars." That amount of money is what the Pentagon refers to as "a rounding error."

The fact is that the fourth estate is a more critical public good than the military, police, fire, electricity, roads, water, wall street bailouts, or many other things we treat as public goods, or — for that matter — healthcare, retirement income, education, or many other things that some of us try to force our government to treat as public goods. And yet we do not even ask that freedom of the press be supported in any way by our elected representatives. Despite our own nation's history and many other nations' current experience of publicly funding journalism without allowing politicians to censor and direct it, we are unable to even imagine such a thing, preferring to stick with the ever worsening pretense of corporate journalism in the name of a perverted freedom of the press that has been reduced to freedom of speech for corporate conglomerates.

We need to read "The Death and Life of American Journalism" and to think hard about the fate of media outlets that are not discussing this book despite it's convincing prediction of their early demise. If these institutions would rather perish than change, how much concern can they have for the future of you or me or our children's children?

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