

Project Censored 25th Anniversary

Introduction

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A review of the stories that have been selected by Project Censored over 25 years reveals several clear patterns. The stories are of considerable interest to the media constituencies: the corporate sector, the state authorities, and the general public. They fall in a domain in which corporate-state interests are rather different from those of the public. That such stories would tend to be downplayed, reshaped, and obscured — “censored,” in the terminology of the project— is only to be expected on the basis of even the most rudimentary inspection of the institutional structure of the media and their place in the broader society.

Media service to the corporate sector is reflexive: the media are major corporations. Like others, they sell a product to a market: the product is audiences and the market is other businesses (advertisers). It would be surprising indeed if the choice and shaping of media content did not reflect the interests and preferences of the sellers and buyers, and the business world generally. Even apart from the natural tendency to support state power, the linkage of the corporate sector and the state is so close that convergence of interests on major issues is the norm. The status of audiences is more ambiguous. The product must be available for sale; people must be induced to look at the advertisements. But beyond this common ground, divisions arise.

We can make a rough distinction between the managerial class and the rest. The managers take part in decision-making in the state, the private economy, and the doctrinal institutions. The rest are to cede authority to state and private elites, to accept what they are told, and to occupy themselves elsewhere. There is a corresponding rough distinction between elite and mass media, the former aiming to be instructive, though in ways that reflect dominant interests; the latter primarily to shape attitudes and beliefs, and to divert “the great beast,” as Alexander Hamilton termed the annoying public.

The managers must have a tolerably realistic picture of the world if they are to advance “the permanent interests of the country,” to borrow the phrase of James Madison, the leading framer of the constitutional order, referring to the rights of men of property. The world view of planners and decision makers should conform to the permanent interests, not just parochially but more broadly. The great beast, in contrast, must be caged. The public must have faith in the leaders who pursue “America’s mission,” perhaps subject to personal flaws, or making errors in an excess of good will or naivete, but dedicated to the path of righteousness. Firm in this conviction, the public is to keep to pursuits that do not interfere with the permanent interests. It must accept

subordination as normal and proper; better still, it should be invisible, the way life is and must be.

The political order is largely an expression of these goals, and the doctrinal institutions—the media prominent among them—serve to reinforce and legitimate them. These are tendencies that one would be inclined to expect on elementary assumptions, and there is ample evidence to support such natural conjectures.

The realities are commonly revealed during the electoral extravaganzas. The year 2000 was no exception. As usual, almost half the electorate did not participate and voting correlated with income. Voter turnout remained “among the lowest and most decisively class-skewed in the industrial world.”¹ This feature of so-called “American exceptionalism,” reflecting the unusual dominance and class consciousness of concentrated private power, has been plausibly attributed to “the total absence of a socialist or laborite mass party as an organized competitor in the electoral market.”² The same is true of the “media market”: it is virtually 100 percent corporate, with a “total absence of socialist or laborite” mass media. In both respects, “the system works.”

Control of the media market by private capital is no more a law of nature than its control of the electoral market. In earlier days, there was a vibrant labor-based and popular press that reached a mass audience of concerned and committed readers, on the scale of the commercial press. As in England, it was undermined by concentration of capital and advertiser funding; one should not succumb to myths about markets fostering competition. Unlike in most of the world, business interests are so powerful in the United States that they quickly took control of radio and television, and are now seeking to do the same with the new electronic media that were developed primarily in the state sector over many years—a terrain of struggle today with considerable long-term implications.

Most of the population did not take the year 2000 presidential elections very seriously. Three-fourths of the population regarded the process as a game played by large contributors (overwhelmingly corporations), party leaders, and the PR industry, which crafted candidates to say “almost anything to get themselves elected,” so that one could believe little that they said even when their stand on issues was intelligible. On most issues citizens could not identify the stands of the candidates—not because of ignorance or lack of concern; again, the system is working. Public opinion studies found that among voters concerned more with policy issues than “qualities,” the Democrats won handily. But issues were displaced in the political-media system in favor of style, personality, and other marginalia that are of little concern to the concentrated private power centers that largely finance campaigns and run the government. Their shared interests remained safely off the agenda, independently of the public will.³

Crucially, questions of economic policy must be deflected. These are of great concern both to the general population and to private power and its political representatives, but commonly with opposing preferences. The business world and its media overwhelmingly support “neoliberal reforms”: corporate-led versions of globalization, the investor-rights agreements called “free trade agreements,” and other devices that concentrate wealth and power. The public tends to

¹ Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn* (Hill & Wang, 1986).

² Walter Dean Burnham, “The 1980 Earthquake,” in T. Ferguson and J. Rogers, eds, *The Hidden Election* (Pantheon, 1981).

³ For data on the elections, here and below, see Ruy Teixeira, *American Prospect*, December 18; Thomas Patterson, head of the Harvard University Vanishing Voter Project, op-eds, *NYT*, November 8, *Boston Globe*, December 15, 2000.

oppose these measures, despite near-uniform media celebration. And unless care is taken, people might find ways to articulate and even implement their concerns. Opponents of the international economic arrangements favored by the business-government-media complex have an “ultimate weapon,” the Wall Street Journal observed ruefully: the general public, which must therefore be marginalized.⁴

For the public, the trade deficit had become the most important economic issue facing the country by 1998, outranking taxes or the budget deficit—the latter a concern for business, but not the public, so that lack of public interest must be portrayed as the public’s “balanced-budget obsession.”⁵ People understand that the trade deficit translates into loss of jobs; for example, when U.S. corporations establish plants abroad that export to the domestic market. But free capital mobility is a high priority for the business world: it increases profit and also provides a powerful weapon to undermine labor organizing by threat of job transfer—technically illegal, but highly effective, as labor historian Kate Bronfenbrenner has demonstrated in important work.⁶ Such threats contribute to the “growing worker insecurity” that has been hailed by Alan Greenspan and others as a significant factor in creating a “fairy-tale economy” by limiting wages and benefits, thus increasing profit and reducing inflationary pressures that would be unwelcome to financial interests. Another useful effect of these measures is to undermine democracy. Unions have traditionally offered people ways to pool limited resources, to think through problems that concern them collectively, to struggle for their rights, and to challenge the monopoly of the electoral and media markets. Capital mobility provides a new way to avert these threats, one of several that are cleaner than the resort to violence to crush working people that was another feature of “American exceptionalism” over a long period.

No such matters are to intrude into the electoral process: the general population is induced to vote (if at all) on the basis of peripheral concerns.

Higher-income voters favor Republicans, so that the class-skewed voting pattern benefits the more openly pro-business party. But more revealing than the abstention of those who are left effectively voiceless is the way they vote when they do participate. The voting bloc that provided Bush with his greatest electoral success was middle-to-lower income white working class voters, particularly men, but women as well. By large margins they favored Gore on major policy issues, insofar as these arose in some meaningful way during the campaign. But they were diverted to safer preoccupations.

The public is well aware of its marginalization. In the early years of Project Censored, about half the population felt that the government is run by “a few big interests looking out for themselves.” During the Reagan years, as “neoliberal reforms” were more firmly instituted, the figure rose to over 80 percent. In 2000, the director of Harvard’s Vanishing Voter Project reported that “Americans’ feeling of powerlessness has reached an alarming high,” with 53 percent responding “only a little” or “none” to the question: “How much influence do you think people like you have on what government does?” The previous peak, 30 years ago, was 41 percent. During the campaign, over 60 percent of regular voters regarded politics in America as “generally pretty

⁴ Glenn Burkins, “Labor Fights Against Fast-Track Trade Measure,” WSJ, September 16, 1997.

⁵ On how the feat was accomplished, see my “Consent without Consent,” *Cleveland State Law Review*, 44.4 (1996).

⁶ *Uneasy Terrain: The Impact of Capital Mobility on Workers, Wages, and Union Organizing*, Cornell 2000, updating her earlier studies.

disgusting.” In each weekly survey, more people found the campaign boring than exciting, by a margin of 5 to 3 in the final week.

The election was a virtual statistical tie, with estimated differences within the expected error range. A victor had to be chosen, and a great deal of attention was devoted to the process and what it reveals about the state of American democracy. But the major and most revealing issues were largely ignored in favor of dimpled chads and other technicalities. Among the crucial issues sidelined was the fact that most of the population felt that no election took place in any serious sense, at least as far as their interests were concerned.

A leading theme of modern history is the conflict between elite sectors, who are dedicated to securing “the permanent interests,” and the unwashed masses, who have a different conception of their role in determining their fate and the course of public affairs. Over the centuries, rights have been won by constant and often bitter popular struggle, including rights of workers, women, and victims of a variety of other forms of discrimination and oppression; and the rights of future generations, the core concern of the environmental movements. The last 40 years have seen notable advances in this regard. But progress is by no means uniform. New mechanisms are constantly devised to restrict the rights that have been gained to formal exercises with little content.

The political order was consciously designed to defend the “permanent interests” against the “levelling spirit” of the growing masses of people who will “labor under all the hardships of life, and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings,” Madison feared, that they may seek to improve their conditions by such measures as agrarian reform (and today, far more). The political system must “protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” Madison advised his colleagues at the Constitutional Convention. Power was therefore to be in the hands of “the wealth of the nation,” not the great masses of people “without property, or the hope of acquiring it,” and who “cannot be expected to sympathize sufficiently with [the rights of the propertied minority or] to be safe depositories of power” over these rights, Madison observed 40 years later, reflecting on the course and prospects of the system of which he was the most influential designer.

The problems and conflicts persist, though their nature has radically changed over time. A particularly important shift took place with the “corporatization of America” a century ago, which sharply concentrated power, creating “a very different America from the old” in which “most men are servants of corporations,” Woodrow Wilson observed. This “different America,” he continued, is “no longer a scene of individual enterprise,...individual opportunity and individual achievement” but a society in which “small groups of men in control of great corporations wield a power and control over the wealth and business opportunities of the country,” administering markets and becoming “rivals of the government itself”; more accurately, becoming barely distinguishable from “the government itself.” Wilsonian progressivism also gave a new cast to the traditional vision of the political order. In his “progressive essays on democracy,” Walter Lippmann, the most influential figure in American journalism in the 20th century, described the public as “ignorant and meddling outsiders” who should be mere “spectators of action,” not participants; their role is limited to periodic choice among the “responsible men,” who are to function in “technocratic insulation,” in World Bank lingo, “securing the permanent interests.”

The doctrine, labelled “polyarchy” by democratic political theorist Robert Dahl, is conventional in elite opinion. It has been given still firmer institutional grounds by the reduction of the public arena under the “neoliberal reforms” of the past 20 years, which shift authority even more than before to unaccountable private concentrations of power, under the cynical slogan “trust

the people.” Democracy is to be construed as the right to choose among commodities. Business leaders explain the need to impose on the population a “philosophy of futility” and “lack of purpose in life,” to “concentrate human attention on the more superficial things that comprise much of fashionable consumption.” People may then accept and even welcome their meaningless and subordinate lives, and forget ridiculous ideas about managing their own affairs. They will abandon their fate to the responsible men, the self-described “intelligent minorities” who serve and administer power—which lies elsewhere, a hidden but crucial premise. It is within this general framework that the media function.

Like other major sectors of the economy, the corporate media are tending toward oligopoly. The process reduces still more the limited possibility that public concerns might come to the fore when they interfere with state-corporate interests, or that state policies might be seriously challenged.

On loyalty to state power, the common understanding is sometimes articulated with refreshing candor. For example, the leading political commentator of *The New York Times* opened the new year by hailing Clinton’s “creative compromise” for the Middle East. Since the President has spoken, we “now know what the only realistic final deal looks like,” and “now that we know what the deal looks like, the only question left is: Will either side be able to take it?”⁷ How could there be a different question?

Not appropriate for discussion, and kept in the shadows, are the terms of the President’s statesmanlike plan. Anyone with access to the Israeli press and a map, or the alternative media here, could have discovered throughout the recent negotiations and the seven-year “peace process” that Clinton’s “creative compromise,” like its predecessors, is designed to imprison the Palestinian population in isolated enclaves in the territories that Israel conquered in 1967, separated from one another, and from the vastly expanded region called “Jerusalem,” by Israeli settlements and infrastructure projects, and also separated from the Arab world; one well-known Middle East specialist estimates that “25 percent of West Bank territory has been arbitrarily absorbed into Jerusalem” alone, with U.S. authorization and support.⁸ In “Jerusalem,” we learn from the press, Arab neighborhoods are to be administered by Arabs and Jewish neighborhoods by Jews. What could be more fair? At least, until we look a little further and find that the Arab neighborhoods are isolated sections of the tiny former East Jerusalem, while the Jewish “neighborhoods” that are to be integrated within Israel include “settlements like Ma’ale Adumim”⁹—a city that was established well to the east in order to bisect the West Bank—along with other “neighborhoods” extending far to the north and south. Like other major settlement projects of the Oslo period, Ma’ale Adumim has flourished thanks to the Labor doves whose magnanimity we are called upon to admire for their “concessions” in the territories they conquered in 1967. Another part of the “compromise” is an Israeli salient that partially bisects the remaining territories to the north, and other mechanisms to ensure that the resources and usable land of the occupied territories will be in the hands of the leading U.S. client state, long a pillar of U.S. policy in the strategic Middle East region.¹⁰

⁷ Thomas Friedman, *NYT*, January 2, 2001.

⁸ Augustus Richard Norton, *Current History*, January 2001.

⁹ Jane Perlez, “Clinton Presents a Broad New Plan for Mideast Peace,” *NYT*, December 26, 2000.

¹⁰ As the “Clinton compromise” faced collapse, it was finally recognized that the Palestinians object to the Bantustan-style enclave structure imposed by U.S.-Israeli diplomatic and development programs during the Clinton years. See Jane Perlez, Joel Greenberg, *NYT*, January 3, 2001, citing Palestinian objections.

Without proceeding, the outcome conforms very well to the rejectionist stand that the United States has upheld in international isolation for more than 25 years, effectively denying the national rights of one of the two contending parties in the former Palestine. The record has been dispatched to the depths of the memory hole with a degree of efficiency and uniformity that is rather impressive in a free society. Without substantial independent research, readers of the U.S. media could scarcely have even a limited grasp of one of the major stories of the year 2000.

Even the most elementary facts are not proper media fare if they interfere with the image of impartial benevolence. Consider just a single illustration: the role of U.S. helicopters, very important to the Israeli army because “it is impractical to think that we can manufacture helicopters or major weapons systems of this type in Israel,” the Ministry of Defense director-general General Amos Yaron reported. The late 2000 confrontations began on September 29, when Israeli troops killed several people and wounded over 100 as they left the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem after Friday prayers. On October 1, U.S. helicopters with Israeli pilots killed two Palestinians. The next day, helicopters killed 10 and wounded 35 at Netzarim, the scene of a great deal of fighting: the small Israeli settlement there is hardly more than an excuse for a military base and roads that cut the Gaza Strip in two, isolating Gaza City and separating it from Egypt as well (with other barriers to the south). On October 3, the defense correspondent of Israel’s leading journal, *Ha’aretz*, reported the largest purchase of U.S. military helicopters in a decade: Blackhawks and parts for Apache attack helicopters sent a few weeks earlier. On October 4, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, the world’s most prominent military journal, reported that the Clinton Administration had approved a request for new Apache attack helicopters, the most advanced in the U.S. arsenal, having decided, apparently, that the upgrades were not sufficient for the current needs of attacking the civilian population. The same day, the U.S. press reported that Apaches were attacking apartment complexes with rockets at Netzarim. The German press agency quoted Pentagon officials who said that “U.S. weapons sales do not carry a stipulation that the weapons can’t be used against civilians. We cannot second-guess an Israeli commander who calls in helicopter gunships.” So matters continued. A few weeks later, the local Palestinian leader Hussein Abayat was killed by a missile launched from an Apache helicopter (along with two women standing nearby), as the assassination campaign against the indigenous leadership was initiated.¹¹

Rushing new military helicopters under these circumstances was surely newsworthy, and it was reported: in an opinion piece in *Raleigh*, North Carolina, on October 12. An Amnesty International condemnation of the sale of U.S. helicopters on October 19 also passed in virtual silence.¹² Such facts will not do. Rather, we must join in praise for our leaders, recognizing that their words stipulate the “only realistic final deal,” while we ponder the strange character flaws of the intended beneficiaries of their solicitude.

¹¹ Yaron, *Globes*, *Journal of Israel’s Business Arena*, December 21, 2000. October 1–2 attacks, Report on Israeli Settlement (Washington DC), November–December 2000. Amnon Barzilai, “Israel Air Force closes largest helicopter deal of decade,” *Ha’aretz*, October 3. Robin Hughes, “USA approves Israel’s Apache Longbow request,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, October 4. Charles Sennott, *Boston Globe*, October 4. Dave McIntyre (Washington), *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, October 3, 2000. Gideon Levy, *Ha’aretz*, December 24, and Graham Usher, *Middle East Report*, Winter 2000, on Abayat assassination in Beit Sahur on November 9.

¹² Ann Thompson Cary, “Arming Israel...,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), October 12. “Amnesty International USA Calls for Cessation of all Attack Helicopter Transfers to Israel,” AI release, October 19, 2000.

The examples are selected virtually at random. In fact, even the valuable record of 25 years provided by Project Censored can do no more than barely skim the surface. What it has been investigating is a major phenomenon of “really existing democracy,” which we ignore at our peril.

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